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BERTRAND RUSSELL

Philosopher & Humanist

John Lewis



Books by John Lewis

AN INTRODUCTION TO PHILOSOPHY
MARXISM AND THE OPEN MIND
RELIGIONS OF THE WORLD MADE SIMPLE
TEACH YOURSELF THE HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY
MARXISM AND THE IRRATIONALISTS
SCIENCE, FAITH AND SCEPTICISM
MAN AND EVOLUTION
THE LIFE AND TEACHING OF KARL MARX

BERTRAND RUSSELL

Philosopher and Humanist

JOHN LEWIS

1968

LAWRENCE AND WISHART
LONDON

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*Printed in Great Britain by
Clarke, Doble & Brendon Ltd.
Cattedown, Plymouth*

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FOREWORD

Bertrand Russell has probably made a greater original contribution to philosophy than any other thinker in Great Britain since Hume. But if his name is better known than that of any of his contemporaries, this is not entirely due to his contribution to formal logic and mathematics or to the "analytical" method of enquiry which has been so influential in philosophical thinking. The wider public has been more concerned with his social and political writings, which Russell himself believes to have no necessary connection with his views on logic and epistemology. "On these questions," he says, "I did not write in my capacity as a philosopher; I wrote as a human being who suffered from the state of the world, wished to find some way of improving it, and was anxious to speak in plain terms to others who had similar feelings."

But the fact that there was not for him any "necessary connection" between these two phases of his thought surely suggests a surprising inconsistency between the philosopher and the humanist which can only have the effect of cutting the ground from beneath his own deepest convictions. It would appear to be essential for the understanding both of Russell's philosophy and his social teaching to examine this contradiction and to submit to close scrutiny a philosophy so strangely divorced from real life.

It will not be easy to examine a philosophy based on logical formulations of some complexity and yet keep within the limits of comprehensibility as far as the general reader is concerned, unless the theoretical exposition is somewhat simplified and the logical technicalities reduced to a mini-

mum. But it is hoped that in doing so nothing essential to Russell's thinking as a whole will be lost.

It is not the intention in this examination of Russell's philosophy to go on to discuss alternatives to those positions which are criticised. The development of philosophy beyond or in opposition to Logical Analysis is of considerable importance, but it must remain a matter for separate treatment.

I

THE TWO BERTRAND RUSSELLS

It is a reasonable supposition that of this century's philosophers Bertrand Russell will be longest remembered. His influence has gone far beyond his native island and his work is well known not only in America but in Eastern Europe, India and China. His name is probably better known than that of any other living British philosopher.

This is not only because of the originality and importance of his philosophical works but because the very writing of them displays a lucidity of exposition almost unique among academic philosophers. He is a great stylist and by the clarity of his writing, its elegance, and his frequent recourse to savage irony and mordant wit, has won a Nobel Prize for Literature as well as securing a readership embracing not only the academically qualified but a multitude of readers.

For many years his philosophical work has been overshadowed by the considerable scale of his social and political writing. Here his views are much easier to understand, for while the logical and philosophical discussions deal with highly abstract conceptions which are far removed from everyday life, the social discussions move on a common-sense level and Russell's views, if not all their implications, can be easily grasped by the ordinary reader. It is this kind of activity, his interventions into the political sphere in particular, which led to his imprisonment for pacifist propaganda in the First World War, and the loss of his Fellowship in Trinity College, Cambridge. When he enters this

field, to use his own words, he writes "as a human being, who suffers from the state of the world, who wishes to find some way of improving it, and is anxious to speak in plain terms to others who have similar feelings". This has made him a controversial figure, as influential and often enough as heartily detested as those earlier philosophers from Socrates to John Stuart Mill who were as eloquent in the public forum as they were erudite in the circles of academic learning. And so Russell after years of abstract philosophising descends upon the surface of this planet and begins to reason passionately about war, education, marriage, socialism. He revives again the role of the philosopher as a public figure. At a time when academic philosophy was becoming increasingly abstruse and remote, he deliberately left the study in order to criticise, excite and interest ordinary men about the great questions facing humanity.

There are in fact two Russells—the philosopher and the publicist. He himself is apt to insist on their total separation. But it is to be doubted whether his philosophical views are as irrelevant to his social thinking as he is sometimes disposed to believe. He is after all a member of a distinguished Whig family, the Russells, and of the Stanleys on his mother's side, two of the oldest and most famous families in England, representing the great Whig tradition of liberal principles and individualist conviction. His grandfather, Lord John Russell, was a great Liberal Prime Minister, who fought for Free Trade, universal free education, for the emancipation of the Jews, for radical reform in every field. His father, Viscount Amberley, was a rationalist, who chose John Stuart Mill as the "godfather" of his son.

In the sphere of philosophy Russell inherits the great tradition of the empirical British philosophers Locke, Hume, Bentham and Mill, who played a not inconsiderable role in the political affairs of the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries. These men were concerned to eliminate from thinking all superfluous entities and arbitrary assumptions,

a procedure which undermined, and was intended to undermine, the ecclesiastical sanction of monarchical and autocratic government, and to overthrow obstructive traditional institutions. This empirical thinking goes even farther back to the medieval British philosopher William of Ockham, who first enunciated what came to be the guiding principle of Russell's philosophy—"not to multiply entities unnecessarily". From this followed his unending efforts to reduce the universe to an ever-diminishing number of irreducible facts, a process to be achieved by a continuous paring away of unessential elements. Now this could not but have a profound influence in every department of human thinking, social, ethical, religious and political. It is the impulse behind Russell's whole method—sceptical, analytical, destructive of all that could be discarded, whether in philosophy or in morals, sociology and politics. It was the motive of his relentless criticism of religion and his merciless attack on the illogicality of mysticism.¹

Behind all his thinking and writing, behind all his social actions we feel his passionate hostility to all culpable obscurity of thought, such as he found not only in religion, but in philosophical speculation and conventional moralising. This is the one thing for which Russell is without hesitation to be admired and reverenced, this life-long intellectual honesty and its realisation as a faith. As he once said : "I wanted certainty in the kind of way in which people want religious faith." Though it may seem strange to say this of so determined a sceptic, there is indeed something almost religious in his search for impersonal objective truth. When he entered the field of controversy clarity of thought and honesty of speech were to sweep like a cleansing stream through the neuroses and superstitions of the contemporary mind. The first of all moral laws was to think straight : "Better the world should perish than that I, or any other human being, should believe a lie. . . . But that is the religion

¹ *Mysticism and Logic* (1919).

of thought, in whose scorching flames the dross of the world is being burnt away.”²

This passion for intellectual truth was strangely and inconsistently mingled with quite another devotion—for which he confessed he could advance no rational grounds whatever—the love of humanity. Out of the complexities of his mathematical formulae and analytical logic there stepped yet another Russell, and poured out upon statesmen, ecclesiastics, sober educationists, dogmatic moralists and those whose finer feelings had been lulled to slumber “by all the easy speeches that comfort cruel men”, a flood of polemics that did not stop no matter how violently he was denounced or whatever steps were taken to silence him. In America he was judicially pronounced unfit to occupy the chair of philosophy in the City College of New York, and not long afterwards he was peremptorily dismissed from the Barnes Foundation in Pennsylvania. The Russell who had set out to be a disembodied intellect now revealed himself as the prophet of moral idealism.

It is this phase of his life, increasingly absorbing all his attention and energies, that has directed attention away from his philosophical thinking and its profound and penetrating influence on the deeper levels of contemporary thinking. This neglect of his philosophy has also been encouraged by the interest attracted to his personality by his recent *Autobiography*. We have found ourselves more concerned with his childhood and youth, his developing mind, the influence of his grandmother Lady Russell and his Cambridge friends, his affairs of the heart and his marriage; until the thinker all but disappears and the engaging eccentric fills the picture. His indisputable intellectual reputation, his unfailing charm, his genuine courage and indefatigable vigour at a great age, have all endeared him to the public, still charmed by his wit and by his rapier-like effectiveness in debate. We have even grown indulgent towards his heresies and dissenting

² *Ibid.*

protests, at the same time that we are increasingly indifferent to the basic principles of his powerful and disturbing philosophy. All may be forgiven in so venerable and attractive a figure, whose independence of mind, aristocratic manner and precise eighteenth century voice witness so continuously to his undying concern for human dignity, for mercy, and for social justice.

This is not the tribute which the philosopher himself would wish to receive. It has in it something almost insulting, when it concerns a man like Russell. It is an indignity to have the philosophy which has re-directed the current of fundamental thinking in England and America passed over as if it were a creditable performance no doubt, and of interest to the learned, but of no consequence to mankind in general for whom it appears incomprehensible and irrelevant.

It is of course a difficult philosophy to understand. What important philosophy is not? And it is rendered more so because Russell is not the kind of philosopher who thinks out his system once and for all and never subsequently modifies it. On the contrary he will be found to be continually developing, modifying or changing his views, so that we shall often find in the earlier works a definite position, confidently asserted, which later on, he tells us, he has been led to abandon. And yet all the writings from the earliest to the latest are the work of the same mind, and there is something fundamental which has not changed. Moreover, the emphasis on logic and avoidance of speculative metaphysics seem to have had the opposite effect to what might have been expected. It makes understanding a more exacting and relentless quest. We are sternly held back from playing with broad explanatory world views. All that kind of thinking is contemptuously dismissed.

What emerges and what alone is important for us in Russell's philosophy is his determination to apply to philosophical problems the broad principles which have

proved successful in the study of scientific problems. This will deliver us from the delusion that any philosophy can tell us something about the universe as a whole—which science never attempts to do. Philosophy has been corrupted by the wishful thinking which demands a comprehensive understanding of *everything*, and this is still the unconscious premise of most metaphysical systems. “Reality,” says Bosanquet, “is not merely one and self-consistent, but it is a system of reciprocally determinate parts.” Russell regards this as a wholly unjustifiable assumption. The oneness of the world “is merely the oneness of what is seen by a single spectator or apprehended by a single mind”.³ It is purely subjective. There is no convincing reason for regarding the universe as a rational and meaningful system.

Russell’s exhaustive and highly sceptical analysis of philosophical problems makes considerable demands on his readers, but his clarity and skill in presentation never desert him and his most exacting discussions are illuminated by flashes of wit and profound insight. It is difficult to make up one’s mind whether Russell is an obscure philosopher with frequent amazingly lucid intervals, or on the other hand, a philosopher almost as clear as the profundity of his problems permits. Yet the necessity of coming to terms with his fundamental ideas cannot be evaded. They underlie all that he has to say on questions of supreme importance for mankind. They constitute the foundation of so much that has found powerful and persuasive expression in many fields of human life, foundations which cannot be allowed to go unexamined.

This is not going to be quite such a difficult task as might be supposed, if we can make our way through or around those passages of argumentation comprehensible only to the experts, and sometimes not even to them. Some of the more tangled thickets have been cleared away by recent critical work, and on other issues the obscurity has been found to be

* *Ibid.*

due not to profundity but error. Even where we are forced to disagree we are still compelled to listen; because, as so often in philosophy, the errors of the wise are more profitable than the truisms of the pedant.

It is not only the philosophy of Russell that must be subjected to close scrutiny. The causes he has supported and the remedies for the world's ills that he has propounded cannot all of them command our unquestioning assent. Some of his pronouncements have indeed proved disastrous—notably his pacifist propaganda during the Munich period, and his advocacy of preventive atomic war against Russia in 1946. And on many other issues, while we applaud his motives and recognise his sincerity, we may find ourselves convinced of the inadequacy of his diagnosis and the error of his remedies. Yet here again, in the course of such a critical examination of his opinions and of their rational and irrational grounds, the permanent contribution of Russell's ideas clearly emerges by the side of recognisable error.

THE MAKING OF A PHILOSOPHER

In his *Autobiography* Russell tells us how at the age of eleven he began the philosophical enquiries which he was to pursue with pertinacity for the whole course of his academic career. His brother Frank began at this time to teach him Euclid. But as this branch of mathematics begins with certain axioms, which are assumed and not proved, Russell refused to accept them unless he could see good reasons for doing so. He was never furnished with these reasons, and many years later he knew that it was by no means necessary to accept all Euclid's axioms as self-evident truths. At the age of eleven, however, since he could not go on unless he accepted them, he had to do so. "The doubt as to the premisses of mathematics which I felt at that moment," he says, "remained with me, and determined the course of my subsequent work." In fact from then until he was thirty-eight mathematics was his chief source of happiness.

No doubt he was not the first intelligent boy to ask that question. What *was* significant was that he went on asking it and after twenty years' hard thinking reached an answer that opened the way to new conceptions of the laws of logic and the function of reason. Even as a boy, and this becomes more manifest in his youth, he could never be satisfied with a lack of sufficient grounds for any belief whatsoever. He believed that as soon as it is held that any belief, no matter what, is important for some other reason than that it is true, a whole host of evils is ready to spring up.

This absorption in the basic principles of mathematics, the most abstract of all enquiries, also indicates a profound inwardness and detachment from the coarse-fibred realities of the world which characterised his whole *mental* life. It appears in the surrender of his early intention to become a physicist. "I was completely destitute of the concrete kinds of skill which are necessary in science. Science was therefore closed to me as a career." It may be thought that a similar lack of the practical sense may also account for an unrealistic approach to political and social problems, and a somewhat arrogant perfectionism in his ethical demands. Nevertheless these recondite studies proved to be of considerable importance and some effort must be made to understand them.

In 1892 Russell was elected at Cambridge to 'The Society' which outsiders, if they know of it, called 'The Apostles'. It consisted of a small group of some of the most distinguished men in the university, including G. E. Moore, J. M. E. McTaggart, Maynard Keynes, Lytton Strachey and A. N. Whitehead. Their long, leisurely, informal discussions resulted in a fertile interpenetration of ideas and of enlightenment which greatly stimulated the minds of its members. It was Whitehead who had read Russell's examination papers when he sat for his scholarship examination, and detected his ability and remarkable personality. He at once introduced him to a circle of brilliant students and the friendships that followed were permanent. Whitehead was at that time generally regarded as a mathematician; his *Treatise on Universal Algebra* had led to his election to the Royal Society in 1903; but subsequently he turned to philosophy and eventually at the age of sixty-three became Professor of Philosophy at Harvard. During the first ten years of Russell's work at Cambridge in the fields of logic and mathematics, Whitehead became his closest associate and collaborator. They found themselves thinking so much on the same lines that they joined forces to produce

the epoch-making work which laid the foundations of the new philosophy. This was their *Principia Mathematica*.

The new approach to mathematics demanded rigour in definitions and the rigorous proof of all theorems proceeding from the axioms. These demands had already been expressed in the work of the great mathematicians who had refined the theory of the calculus, and again in the development of non-euclidian geometry, where Lobachevsky and Reimann showed how by omitting Euclid's axiom of parallels different geometries resulted. Russell attempted nothing less than to dig down to the absolute foundations of all mathematics, by the discovery of the irreducible concepts or "primitive ideas", and the rock-bottom set of indispensable axioms, from which the whole body of mathematical theory could be rigorously deduced. These he found, not in mathematics at all as generally understood, but in logic. Together with Whitehead, he attempted to show how, starting from certain basic *logical* concepts, taken as primitive, self-understood and indefinable, and a very few axioms of logic, it was possible to deduce the whole of mathematics. Thus mathematics became "a more highly developed form of logic".

What was now wanted was a symbolic system which would express both the logical processes on the one hand and the mathematical processes on the other. This would provide a kind of algebra of purely formal sequences of inferences serving logical and mathematical requirements simultaneously. Frege, the great German logician, had been for long engaged on a similar project and so had the Italian mathematician Peano. Russell and Whitehead worked with incredible intensity on this problem, immensely stimulated by these thinkers. "Suddenly," says Russell, "in the space of a few weeks, I discovered what appeared to be definitive answers to the problems which had baffled me for years." Intellectually, he declares, it was the highest point of his life. At one point in his work he tells us that he spent fruitless days completely frustrated, and felt likely to spend the

rest of his life looking at the blank sheet of paper on his desk. But that particular problem too was solved, to his satisfaction if not to that of later critics, and the work was finished. It took nine years, and in the event altered the whole conception of the relations of logic and mathematics, and revolutionised philosophy. With the aid of the Royal Society and the University Press it was published in 1910. His intellect, he says, never quite recovered from the strain, and ever since he has felt less capable of dealing with difficult abstractions. However he was soon engaged in the application of the new methods of philosophical enquiry to such questions as the nature of the physical world and the nature of mind. No-one else was conscious of any flagging of his philosophical powers.

What exactly was the significance of all this for philosophy? How did it portend a philosophical revolution? The important feature in Russell's logical-mathematical researches was *the construction of definitions* out of "primitive ideas". The concepts of mathematics, the concepts of numbers and of the mathematical relations and properties of numbers, were reduced to their simplest logical terms by formulating exact definitions of them in terms of elementary logical ideas taken as primitive and self-evident. Such mathematical entities as numbers were exhibited as "logical constructions". And when this was done, the most rigorous proofs could be given of all theorems about them. This was, in effect, a "logical analysis" of the concepts of mathematics; and in terms of that analysis all the concepts could be made clear, and rigorous proofs be offered, where formerly there was too often obscurity and mere speculation and guesswork.

From the time of its publication, *Principia Mathematica*, as its implications were realised, began to revolutionise not only the understanding of logic and mathematics, but the whole trend of philosophical thinking. Its relevance to philosophy was at once apparent to Russell himself. In his *Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy* (1919) he says :

"It deals with a body of knowledge which to those that accept it appears to invalidate much traditional philosophy and even a good deal of what is current in the present day. In this way, as well as by its bearing on still unsolved problems, mathematical logic is relevant to philosophy."

In philosophy too, the same kind of rigorous logical analysis of concepts could hope to clear away confusion, bringing clarity in place of obscurity; and if it did not solve all the problems of philosophy, as they have traditionally been understood, it would expose pretended solutions which rested merely on imprecise formulations of concepts, and would get rid of idle speculation.

What it was really doing, through the more precise use of language and a strict regard for the real functions of logic, was to show how many philosophical puzzles disappear when the questions they seek to answer are properly framed, or are by their very nature beyond the scope of the mind to reason about.

This was to state in new and more sophisticated terms the theme of those earlier empiricist thinkers who had concerned themselves with *the limits of the human understanding*. It had been the method of Ockham and later of Descartes. It had appeared again in Locke and Hume and in Kant's *Critique*. What Russell was saying was what Hume, with a less rigorous use of logic and knowledge of mathematical theory, had said in his *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* in 1748 :

"When we run over our libraries, persuaded of these principles, what havoc must we make? If we take in our hand any volume of divinity or school metaphysics, for instance; let us ask, Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number? No. Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence? No. Commit it then to the flames for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion."

It was to terminate in the linguistic philosophy of Wittgenstein and Ayer, in the philosophy to end all philosophies.

It would be a mistake, however, to imagine that mathematical-logic was the sole basis of Russell's philosophy. The emotional, the ethical, even the mystical, became for him not something alien to reason, but rather the dialectical counterpart to the thinking that leaves the affectional nature without explanation or justification. He himself was well aware of its reality and its power—but while he could never deny its reality neither could he in any way vindicate its authority. When he became aware of it, it swept through him with compelling power : "Having for years cared only for exactness and analysis, I found myself filled with semi-mystical feelings about beauty, with an intense interest in children, and with a desire almost as profound as that of Buddha to find some philosophy which should make life durable." This was to issue in the enthusiasm for moral and social reform of the second Bertrand Russell, the counter-philosophy which in the second half of his life entirely took the place of the analytical passion of his earlier years.

Russell had always been more sensitive to the spiritual overtones of life and above all to every kind of human suffering than he usually allowed to appear. He effectually concealed this by the crisp precision and penetration of his intellect and the dry severity of his ruthless wit. This belied the real man. He tells us how in 1906 he went to Newnham to hear Gilbert Murray read his translation of the *Hippolytus of Euripides*, which includes the great Hymn to Eros.

Eros, Eros, who blindest tear by tear
Men's eyes with hunger, thou swift foe that pliest
Deep in our hearts joy like an edged spear;
Come not to me with evil haunting near
Wrath on the wind, nor jarring of the clear
Wing's music as thou fiest.

There is no shaft that burneth, not in fire,
Not in wild stars, far off and flinging fear
As in thine hands the shafts of all desire.

Eros, Child of the highest.

He was profoundly moved by the beauty of the poetry. He writes to Murray that year :

"Dear Gilbert,

I have now read the *Hippolytus*, and feel impelled to tell you how much it has affected me. Those of us who love poetry read the great masterpieces of modern literature before we have any experience of the passions they deal with. To come across a new masterpiece with a more mature mind is a wonderful experience and one which I have found almost overwhelming.

Yours ever, Bertrand Russell"

It was on the same occasion when on their return home they found Mrs. Whitehead undergoing the agony of a severe heart attack. He says : "She seemed cut off from everyone and everything by walls of agony, and the sense of solitude of each human soul suddenly overwhelmed me—the loneliness of the human soul is unendurable; nothing can penetrate it except the highest intensity of the sort of love that religious teachers have preached." He tells us that the effect of this experience was to make of him "a completely different person".

We find him then, in these days when his intellect was stretched to its greatest intensity and his major creative work was being done, more than a logician—a man who could experience warm friendships and profound emotion. Capable of the subtlest mathematics and most recondite metaphysical thought, with a clarity which comes only to a unique and single-minded passion for truth, a man addicted to fields of thought that usually dry up the springs of feeling, and yet warmed and illumined with pity, full of an almost mystical tenderness for mankind.

3

THE ONE AND THE MANY

When Russell came up to Cambridge he became the friend and pupil of the Hegelian philosopher McTaggart, whose wit recommended the idealist philosophy which he taught. He tells us¹ how in 1894 while walking along Trinity Lane he suddenly saw the truth of the famous ontological proof of the existence of God. Already under the influence of Plato, it is not surprising that the philosophy of Hegel greatly attracted him. His tutor Stout and the Oxford philosopher Bradley, whose *Appearance and Reality* had just been published, were in these years the men who directed the development of his thinking. He says of Bradley that he read him with avidity and admired him more than any other recent philosopher.

Russell himself in his *Problems of Philosophy* (1912) gives a clear account of Bradley's position, although by then he had long since ceased to agree with it. He explains that idealism of this kind held that all things are affected by their relations with other things and with the wholes of which they are the parts. A fish it what it is because it is structurally and organically related to its watery environment. "Whatever has relations to things outside itself must contain some reference to those outside things *in its own nature* and could not therefore be what it is if those outside things did not excite it",² and were not related to it in the

¹ *My Mental Development*—in Schlippe, *The Philosophy of Bertrand Russell*.

² *The Problems of Philosophy*.

special ways proper to the whole system of which they are all constituent parts. Thus a thing is not merely something having its own self-possessed characteristics but is actually constituted by its relations to other things.

Bradley held that anything taken in a limited fashion, ignoring the more distant connections it has, is not truly known. The finite is less than completely real, but to proceed to the apprehension of all its relations we cannot stop short of the universe. "The world is a single, indivisible whole, the attempted isolation of any element in which involves distortion and partial falsehood. There are no self-contained facts short of Reality as a whole—the Absolute."⁸ Any other view lands one in contradiction.

This was the view more simply stated by Pope in his *Essay on Man*:

All are but parts of one stupendous whole,
Whose body nature is, and God the soul.
All nature is but art, unknown to thee;
All chance direction, which thou canst not see;
All discord harmony not understood;
All partial evil, universal good :
And, spite of pride, in erring reason's spite,
One truth is clear, whatever is, is right.

Pope's optimistic conclusion was put again, less poetically but more philosophically, by the American idealist, Josiah Royce, who concludes his exposition of the rationality of the universe (properly seen *sub specie aeternitas*) by demonstrating that "the very presence of evil in the temporal order is the condition of the perfection of the eternal order".

There is an interesting letter from Bradley, which he wrote to Russell in the first month of 1914 :

"I think I understand what you say as to the way in which to philosophize. I imagine that it is the right way and that its promises are never illusions, though they may not be kept

⁸ Urmson, *Philosophical Analysis*.

to the letter. There is something perhaps in the whole of things that one feels is wanting when one considers the doctrines before one, and (as happens elsewhere) one feels that one knows what one wants and that what one wants is there—if only one could find it. And for my part I believe that one does find it more or less. And yet still I must believe that one never does or can find the whole in all its aspects, and that there never after all will be a philosopher who did not reach his truth, after all, except by some partiality and one-sidedness—and that, far from mattering, this is the right and the only way. This is however only faith and I could not offer to prove it. I am sure that in my own work, such as it is, I have illustrated the partiality—if nothing else."

This is a modest and kindly letter from one of the Augustans to a challenging newcomer.

In these apparently simple words lies the heart of the idealist philosophy—the desire to find that what we believe is already there, the rationality so sadly missing in the experienced world. Behind the partiality and incompleteness is something implied in and even guaranteed by our very sense of failure, by our hunger for the truth we cannot find. For Bradley this philosophy became the faith that the very conception of rationality implied a rational universe. The principle of unification behind all our mental activity demands an extension to include everything. We are working in the light of a principle of which the Absolute Unity is the full expression. The knowledge of our finitude, our contradictions, our imperfections, implies that we are *already* under the influence of the infinite the rational and the perfect.

However much this may have attracted Russell in his early years at Cambridge, and it certainly did, he very quickly emancipated himself from it as exalting wishful thinking into a metaphysic. It is a strange philosophy that can assert belief in the goodness and rationality of the universe, not on the basis of evidence to that effect, but regardless of it, so that its truth is consistent with any state of

affairs, with any facts whatsoever, and is not only able to reconcile itself with experiences which contradict it, but actually draw substance from them. With such a faith one can indeed gather patience while the world is sad. It represents the triumph of speculative thought over the tragedies of life.

After taking his degree in 1894 Russell went down, but in 1895 he was made a Fellow of Trinity College and returned to Cambridge. Strongly influenced by Moore's *Refutation of Idealism* (1903) he found himself increasingly sceptical of philosophers who tried to prove that the universe was really exactly what they wanted it to be. He repudiated every impulse to substitute wishes for facts, or otherwise to make ourselves the centre of importance in the universe. He was chary of all optimistic intimacy with the Absolute, and insisted on the necessity of careful, unbiased and unshrinking analysis as the only way to get to the reality of things. Facts have to be accepted as ultimate whether agreeable or not. There is to be no leaping over them to reassuring beliefs which explain them away.

Russell saw such philosophical speculation as more the product of the needs and wishes of metaphysicians than the conclusion of impartial investigation. Philosophers had allowed their opinions to be influenced by the desire for edification.⁴ "Knowing, as they supposed," he says, "what beliefs would make men virtuous they have invented arguments, often very sophistical, to prove that these beliefs are true. For my part I reprobate this kind of bias, both on moral and intellectual grounds." He questioned with increasing scepticism all theories which treated the world of experience as illusory and misleading while they sought for a deeper truth hidden from us. Was there any deeper truth? Why not accept the facts as they are and tackle our problems one by one, as we do in science?

⁴ Though Hegel must not be included among them, for he roundly condemned this influence on philosophical thinking. Russell never gave him credit for this.

Russell directed his attack first on the logic of idealist metaphysics. Bradley had argued that every attempt at stating truth is inevitably defective, partial and less than the truth. But if no partial truth is true, this must apply to the "truths" which embody the idealist philosophy. But if these are defective and partial, any deduction we make from them may be vitiated by the falsity of the premises. "In order to prove that there can be only one coherent whole, the theory is compelled to appeal to experience, which must consist in knowing particular truth, and thus requires a notion of truth that the monistic theory cannot admit."⁵

He proceeded to criticise the view that we cannot know any particular thing apart from the total system of related things making up the whole of which it is a part. Russell thought that, applied to society, this meant subordinating the individual to an abstraction, the State. He also rejected on logical grounds the whole idealist doctrine of relations which denied that you could know anything in itself. He believed that a thing could have properties not involving any other thing; or it might have other properties or qualities involving only *one* other thing—such a property is "being married". From the properties thus really belonging to a thing nothing can be deduced by pure logic, as the idealist believed, as to the infinite network of relations which are supposed to constitute it. This, Russell held, was a fundamental logical error, and from it the whole imposing edifice arose. But he knew well enough the attraction of the theory, its profound effects in politics and social theory, and in ethics. He concluded his criticisms by pointing out that the collapse of the Hegelian philosophy "illustrates an important truth, namely, that the worse your logic, the more interesting the consequences to which it gives rise".⁶

What followed from these arguments was, firstly, the

⁵ *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 1906.

⁶ *Problems of Philosophy*.

validity of direct factual knowledge : there could be true facts, for these were no longer dissolved in an endless system of relationships; and secondly, that knowledge of separate facts was possible because one does not find truth only in knowledge of the whole of which the facts are a part. The separate facts have their own identity, their own properties, and our knowledge of them as such is true knowledge.

Russell's process of analysis strips off the surface complexities of the world so as to arrive at "the last residue" analysis. This is much deeper than common sense, for the ultimate facts require a good deal of stripping and probing before we can see them clearly and state what exactly they are. Anyone who takes the trouble to study the inquiries of an analytical philosopher will be surprised at the rigorous character of the argument, and the unfamiliar nature of his findings.

By this road Russell arrived at his ultimate conception of the universe : the world is composed of an infinite number of separate entities. These entities are *independent*; they do not, as the idealist logicians thought, so affect one another that a thing is *altered* by its connection with or dependence on other things, and especially by the process of being known (so that we never know the thing as it is in itself); things cannot interact to the extent of determining one-another's properties. It follows that the idealist is wrong when he says that since things are understood in relation to the organised wholes of which they are a part, knowledge of any one thing, to be complete, must proceed by stages to the knowledge of the *whole*, which is the *One*, the rational Absolute, and the very ultimate reality.

Russell rejects this *One* (belief in which may be called monism), for the ultimate reality of the *Many* (which is called pluralism). The world is composed of an infinite number of mutually independent entities, with relations which are simple and neither change the character of the things related nor lead us irresistibly to a deeper reality of which

the appearances we know as facts are as it were merely adjectives *qualifying* the whole. Each separate fact can be stated separately in an "atomic proposition" (a proposition which states simply: "This thing has this property" or "These things are related by this relation"). And so Russell concludes :

"The most fundamental of my intellectual beliefs is that the idea that the world is a unity is rubbish. I think the universe is all spots and jumps, without unity, and without continuity, without coherence or orderliness, or any of the other properties that governesses love."

Once you were in possession of atomic propositions the new logic, with its vastly improved methods of inference compared with that of traditional logic, could give you all the truth it is possible to have on the basis of the ultimate data you are working with. Such knowledge will certainly not proceed beyond the "logical constructions" of science and the discourse and reasoning by which we describe the world and our behaviour in it. It will never take us beyond the world of experience. The metaphysical speculations of the idealists are not obtainable by the logic which deals with facts. We are therefore compelled to exclude all inferences concerning extra-sensory realities, and all arguments attempting to show what *must* be the nature of the hidden reality which is responsible for the world of appearances. There is no beyond. There is nothing hidden. Metaphysics is banished from philosophy.

Not quite, of course, for Russell's logical atomism is itself a metaphysical theory—a fact which Russell never denied, though many of his positivist followers have not realised this. Russell was propounding a doctrine which tells us what *ultimately* exists; and it actually proceeds *in its own exposition* far beyond the rigid inference of the logical system he has devised. Behind this somewhat perplexing circumstance lies a question which was to cause serious trouble to

his pupil and follower Wittgenstein, who had declared that a proposition can have meaning only if it makes a statement (true or false) of verifiable fact. But the proposition which states this does not itself state a fact. It says something about "the relations between facts and propositions" which is not itself a fact. Therefore "the relation of language to fact" cannot be a topic of significant discourse.

Russell had begun his career by believing in the possibility of proving by metaphysics certain things about the universe that religious feeling made him think important. It was on these grounds that he decided to devote his life to philosophy. But he came to see traditional philosophy as occupying an unsatisfactory position, lying, as it does, between theology with its authoritarian claims to revelation, and science with its appeal to experience and reason. Its own province appeared to him to be a region of speculation in which there was no way to ascertainable knowledge.

Under the influence of Moore he moved away from philosophical idealism to empiricism—to the world of the irreducible facts of experience. Moore took the lead in rebellion, and Russell followed, with a sense of emancipation. Bradley had argued that everything that common sense believes is mere appearance; Moore and Russell reverted to the opposite extreme—that *everything* is real that common sense, uninfluenced by philosophy and theology, supposes real. Russell thus became what is known as a "realist".

Realism is a temper of mind more than a system of philosophy. It represents a disposition to keep ourselves and our preferences out of our judgment of things, letting the facts speak for themselves. Instead of reading our hopes and yearnings into the universe it allows every object its right to exist and to challenge those hopes. It is prepared to depersonalise the world, to see things starkly and factually in a spirit which it conceives to be at once more objective and more scientific than that of idealism.

While idealism attempts to describe the whole of things from one centre, and to relate all the facts and all experience into a rational system, to the realistic eye the joints of the world are loosened. Plain observation sees the world not as one thing but as many things of many kinds. And while it is true that science shows things to be connected in various ways, there is a radical difference between connection and unification. The human wish for unity is highly suspect and all but certain if it is given its head to falsify the facts. It is the virtue of Russell's *analysis* to be entirely honest in this respect, to refuse to believe that there is some higher way of knowing, to follow the path of basing beliefs upon observations as impersonal and as much divested of local and temporal bias as is possible for human beings. Its conclusions are not intended to have any emotional or religious or moral implications whatever.

Here lies Russell's real challenge to that kind of philosophy which, in the hands of the great masters of speculation, has sought to elicit from all the resources of our experience a synthetic vision of the whole which would justify that confidence in the world which has been the fruit of philosophy at its best. The confession that reason is impotent to find such meaning or value in the darkly mysterious aspects of the actual world is regarded by many as a profoundly pessimistic view. No civilisation, it has been said, has ever maintained itself on so negative a foundation. A society cannot maintain its social cohesion unless a decisive majority of its members hold in common a number of guiding ideas and ideals. Whitehead would agree, and adds his warning : "Mankind can flourish on the lower stages of life with merely barbarian flashes of thought. But when civilisation culminates, the absence of a co-ordinating philosophy of life, spread through the community, spells decadence, boredom, and the slackening of effort."

But the rejection of a complete and final theory of exis-

¹ Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas*.

tence does not deprive us of all guidance. If we cannot have a total explanation that does not necessarily mean that we are left entirely destitute. We are rightly warned that throughout its history philosophy has been the particular stronghold of verbal magic. By purely verbal means it has tried to explain things which only science or scientific sociology could explain or which cannot be explained at all. It has created perplexities which are purely logical puzzles, or has concerned itself with pseudo-problems and bogus answers. But if we can reconcile ourselves to something very much less than certainty about something very much less than the universe, we may find that we have light enough to live by, if not to illuminate all possible problems.

The new race of philosophers that has followed Russell is prepared to tolerate a considerable degree of uncertainty. The quest for certainty may lead to emotionally soothing or edifying results, but the acceptance of total explanations may manifest a not fully liberated, pre-scientific type of mind. A completely grown-up mind will have to shoulder the responsibility for working with partial truths and do without "ultimate", "absolute", "metaphysical" explanations. Emotional immaturity often expresses itself in a dogmatic attitude. It is a sign of maturity to be able to live with an unfinished world-view.

4

FOUNDATIONS

Russell's first step in formulating his philosophy was the reduction of the world to a multitude of separate facts. These we *know*—we know them in so far as we directly experience or are aware of them as facts given to us through our senses. We name the objects which constitute elements of the facts by attaching words or labels to them; and we then talk about the world by asserting *atomic propositions*, i.e. by asserting that certain things have certain qualities and stand in certain relations to each other. These can be handled logically, and combined, reasoned about and made intelligible by using the rules of the new logic. What is then important for Russell's analysis is that it locates the ultimate reality in the unit statements of a logical system. This and this alone is a faithful picture of reality. To keep to reality, every proposition must be made to refer to objects empirically given, objects we are directly acquainted with in our sensuous experience, and must simply say how they are arranged to constitute facts. It must say only that certain observable things exhibit certain observable qualities or stand in certain observable relations. Any propositions which pretend to tell us anything above or beyond this must be eliminated.

The immense success of the new logic, its flexibility, its range, i.e. its resources, encouraged Russell to look for remarkable results if it could be transferred from the field of pure logic to the world of facts. It had proved a great

success in mathematics : why not apply it to *all* discourse, and to the problems of philosophy?

We require to discipline our statements of belief, to purge and improve our language, so as to ensure that nothing is to be asserted except statements corresponding to the basic formulas of logic and at the same time comprehending the facts of the world. This language, working strictly in the manner determined by the logical basis and its rules, can express everything that can rationally be said about the world. The rules of rational or logical discourse (thinking or speaking or arguing) in such a language are of course those of the new logic, and applied to language give us what is called a *logical syntax* or *grammar*. Anything said which is not in conformity with the syntax is ungrammatical, and in logic false or meaningless. Russell believed that this would show that a great range of alleged truths, theories, speculations, explanations cannot be expressed logically (grammatically) and must therefore be rejected. Thus thought and speech are purged of an immense amount of nonsense, including a great deal of what has hitherto passed as rational philosophising, profound metaphysical questions, speculative explanations, and religious thinking. This, of course, was the whole purpose of the exercise—to eliminate what cannot really be thought or said at all, thus applying his own basic principle of working with the smallest set of assumptions possible, and getting rid of everything else. This only becomes possible if we have discovered what language really is and related it to reality.

Russell's analytical method had a profound effect on a young Austrian who came to Trinity College, Cambridge in 1912. Wittgenstein's conclusion, which carried him beyond Russell's own position, was embodied in a revolutionary philosophical work, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921), which made a considerable impact upon a circle of philosophers mainly interested in the basic theories of science, known as the Vienna Circle. Here analysis took

a trend in the direction of developing the logic of scientific method, known as Logical Positivism, which accepted Russell's view and that of the *Tractatus* that valid scientific statements must be based on empirical observations. They rejected all other statements as metaphysical. They demanded factual verification for every statement made, holding that for a belief to have any meaning it must be in principle capable of being tested by observation and experiment. *Analysis*, for them, becomes the method of stating the criteria for distinguishing meaningful statements from the multitude of unverifiable claims and propositions.

This raised a number of vital questions concerning the reality of non-observable entities like electrons, and of the inductive process by which scientists arrived at explanatory theories. Russell himself devoted a great deal of thought to this problem of induction and came to the conclusion that inductive knowledge cannot validly give us any general law or explanatory theory, unless based on certain *postulates*.

This was as far as Russell could go in solving the riddle so disturbingly propounded by Hume, which showed the impossibility of inferring from no matter how many instances of one phenomenon following another that they are causally connected and so can be taken as demonstrating a scientific law. Hume asserted that no general law could be reached from sense data by logical induction. Russell agreed with him : "We all know that these rather crude expectations of uniformity are liable to be misleading. The man who has fed the chicken every day throughout its life at last wrings its neck instead, showing that a more refined view as to the uniformity of nature would have been useful to the chicken."¹

Russell confined absolute certainty to abstract logical and mathematical inferences, to tautologies, in which the conclusion is already contained in the premises. In so far as your logical symbols stand for atomic facts you can use

¹ *Problems of Philosophy*.

your computer to find out what is entailed by them, but this can never raise you above the level of the field of observed facts. There is no logical process to give you general laws or explanatory theories.

The only strictly logical and mathematically certain world for Russell, therefore, was "the world taken to be of identical structure with, and to be perfectly represented by, a language with the structure of the mathematico-logical symbolic system of the *Principia Mathematica*."² And its grammar, or logical laws, are the only guide we have as to the structure and meaning of reality.

Russell was aware (though he was forced to make a few concessions) that such a world could only consist of observed facts, labelled with the symbols of his logical notation. His system could give him no information beyond the facts themselves and what they entailed. Such a world was destitute on his own showing of law and explanation.

This is the last word in Russell's exposition of logical analysis. It is a miracle of logical consistency and has got rid of a great deal, in accordance with his basic principle of operating with the minimum of assumptions. But what it gains in consistency it loses in credibility. It falls far short of the measure of scientific truth obtained by scientists and of the range of rational enquiry covered by many other departments of knowledge such as history, psychology and anthropology. It was above all a world destitute of law and offering no data from which logically to infer any explanatory theory, which Russell could only reach by an act of faith, by *postulating* the principles of induction he could not rationally justify. If these are the foundations of Russell's philosophy, there are certainly some loose stones in it.

Russell's Commitment

Russell can only escape from what he saw as the failure of inductive logic by an act of faith, by commitment. Declar-

² Urnson, *Philosophical Analysis*.

ing that the problem of inductive inference remains unsolved, Russell proceeds to *assume* the truth of what he cannot prove by framing a series of postulates on the basis of which the probability of a scientific generalisation can be presumed.

This is to base science ultimately on *an act of faith* in scientific reason—an argument welcomed by those religious persons who find in it a rational excuse for their own act of faith.

The trouble is that if he adopts this way out of the difficulty, the scientist has put himself in the position of being unable to challenge the faith of the mystic. By asserting that even science makes an ultimately irrational commitment the man of religious faith avoids *his* loss of intellectual integrity.

Very much the same kind of escape route has been offered by A. J. Ayer. With Russell he refutes the uncritical view that "we think ourselves entitled to treat the instances which we have been able to examine as reliable guides to those we have not. But, as Hume pointed out, this assumption is not demonstrable."³ Nor can the difficulty be surmounted by "basing our assessments of the probability of hypotheses on an *a priori* theory of probability. . . . I do not see how from a purely formal calculus it is possible to derive any conclusion at all about what is likely to happen."⁴ Ayer rejects all attempts to solve the problem of induction by trying to fit inductive arguments into a deductive mould. He concludes that we must *assume* the correctness of induction and justify the process as rational by its general acceptability in practice. The inductive process is not *justified* by reason, "it goes to set the standard of rationality."⁵

What this means is that since we cannot justify induction rationally we close the gap by choosing another criterion of rationality than logic or scientific inference.

³ Ayer, *The Problem of Knowledge*. ⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Ayer, *The Problem of Knowledge*.

The danger of this procedure is that if we make our criterion of rationality a matter of choice, our attention is shifted from the idea of truth to the *motive* for belief, which is pure pragmatism. Surely this, far from helping us to an easier way to accept certain desirable "truths", is better seen as an explanation of why people come to believe what isn't true. It is an invitation to open the mind to *any* theory. It provides no rational obstacle to more willing believers in the supernatural than Ayer, no immunity against delusion, credulity and wishful thinking.

Are we then compelled to grant that there is no rational justification for regarding any of the laws of science as even approximately true? Must they be regarded as merely useful fictions or operational instructions, or else be blindly accepted by an act of faith?

Fortunately there is a more satisfactory way of dealing with this difficulty which has been proposed by Karl Popper and has secured wide support among scientists.

Popper abandoned altogether the attempt to *justify* induction logically, as misguided and involving one inevitably in an infinite regress in the search for certainty. He directed attention to the importance of methods, not of establishing, but of refuting or *falsifying* general laws and explanatory theories. A well-formulated scientific law or theory is always consistent with the observations on which it has been based—but it must also be so formulated as to make clear what sort of facts would be inconsistent with it, i.e. what future observations would falsify it. Theories are *tested* by making every effort by systematic observation and experiment, to falsify them. And they can be regarded as established so far, and only so far, as they have remained unfalsified. This procedure of testing theories by efforts to falsify them can never reach any absolute certainty as regards the truth of any theory. But scientists do not require in establishing a law or theory the certainty that is proper to mathematical deduction. Deduction of that kind is indispensable *within*

science, but its laws and theories are not *reached* by any such process. And science does very well with the relative truth of hypotheses that have been pretty thoroughly tested and up to a point verified, even though this falls short of absolute finality. This means of course that all such theories are open to revision, modification and sometimes to complete reformulation.

Popper's approach to the problem is based on the fact that no matter how many instances we can find that are consistent with the law or theory under discussion, they do not conclusively verify it; but *one* case inconsistent with the law refutes it. If, therefore, you frame a hypothesis which recognises and states what facts *would* refute it, and then test it and find that nothing happens to refute it, it begins to look like truth. Theories cannot be completely verified, but they can be falsified by a single negative instance. The more possible cases there are where a statement *could* be refuted by the evidence, but in fact isn't, the more reason do we have to treat it as possessing a useful degree of truth.

Now the *method* thus pursued is clearly an example of what Russell means by analysis, as a method of stating the criteria for distinguishing valid statements from the multitude of unverifiable claims. It clearly defines the irreducible and final type of proposition which contains knowledge of actuality.

Knowledge is now seen not as a set of general laws arrived at by inductive inference, simply by generalising from observation, but as a matter of actively proposing theories for the purpose of testing them, making conjectures and trying all ways to find out if facts falsify them. It is a matter of putting imaginative questions to the world and energetically seeking a negative answer.

Wittgenstein's Second Theory

Wittgenstein himself was largely responsible for the logical positivism of the Vienna Circle, who thus came to

concern themselves primarily with verification and held that what could not be verified by observation must be rejected as metaphysical. But he grew profoundly dissatisfied with his own position as expounded in the *Tractatus*, for what he had written there now appeared to him to fall under the condemnation of all statements which cannot be verified by reference to observed facts. One cannot say anything about "the agreement of a proposition with reality", for any propositions which attempt to say what this agreement is are not in themselves statements of empirical fact. The formula which states the criterion of what is a meaningful statement is thus not itself a verifiable proposition.

Wittgenstein proceeded to develop an entirely new kind of analysis, which became known as *linguistic analysis*. Like Russell and the Vienna positivists, he found no sense in propositions or even problems of a philosophical sort; but he no longer concerned himself with problems about how meaningful language can be made to conform to a world of facts. He concerned himself only with language, regarding any question about the relation of language to the reality which it describes as unnecessary and unphilosophical. Thus philosophy changes its role. It does not answer philosophical problems, it removes them from the agenda. If we use words correctly and not metaphysically nor in other ways which give rise to fictitious problems, we can get along perfectly well. There is nothing for philosophy to reveal. It "leaves everything as it is."⁶ Its only task is to cure the mental cramp of minds that have got stuck owing to bad grammar (illogical grammar).

This is a very long way from Bertrand Russell, who disapproved of this final stage of the Analytical method as Wittgenstein and the linguistic philosophers had developed it.

He says :

"The new philosophy seems to me to have abandoned, without necessity, that grave and important task which philo-

⁶ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*.

sophical thought has hitherto pursued. I cannot feel that the new philosophy is carrying on this tradition. The only reason that I can imagine for the restriction of philosophy to such triviality is the desire to separate it sharply from empirical science. I do not think such a separation can be usefully made.

A philosophy which is to have any value should be built upon a wide and firm foundation of knowledge that is not specifically philosophical. Such knowledge is the soil from which the tree of philosophy derives its vigour. Philosophy cannot be fruitful if divorced from empirical science. . . . Science has presented us with a new world, new concepts and new methods, not known in earlier times, but proved by experience, fruitful where the older concepts and methods proved barren."⁷

The new philosophy, Russell feels, is remote from life's problems, and devotes its professional skill to removing muddles which no-one but academic philosophers bother about. Philosophers, in fact, are now doing nothing more than clear up the muddles of other philosophers. Russell wants something better than this, a return to the task of answering the problems which Linguistic Analysis has dismissed.

⁷ *My Philosophical Development.*

5

SOME LOOSE STONES

Russell, as we have seen, conscientiously and assiduously pursued the task of stripping off layer after layer of complexities and excrescences to discover the ultimate realities.

What are these ultimates? We can only find them by *analysing* our statements about physical objects, such as tables and chairs, horses and men, to find out the simple irreducible atomic facts to which we are really referring, though we are not aware of it. These ultimate facts are the facts of sensation of which we are aware when we talk of seeing or touching physical objects such as a table, and our awareness of these sensations leads us to conclusions about tables and the like. The ultimate constituents of the ultimate facts are thus *sense data*. Physical objects are nothing but "logical constructions" from these sense data. With a carefully constructed language corresponding to these ultimates everything that is the case, the whole truth about the world, is expressible in a series of atomic propositions.

Behind this quest for reality is a passionate desire for simplicity, for the reduction of *complexity* to simple fundamentals. Russell rejoices in the satisfaction of creating and contemplating the realm of well-ordered, distinct and stable logical entities, in contrast with the confused world of everyday experience. Logical ideas possess an aloofness from the concrete change and hurly-burly of life, which gives them a clarity and precision satisfying to the intellectual demands of the philosopher.

But the ultimate he eventually reaches is very far from

concrete reality; it is a much over-simplified view of the world. No experience and no science has ever given us grounds for accepting such elements of permanent and enduring reality, such self-subsistent, self-caused, permanent units of being. Nor do the disconnected atomic facts, each reflected by an atomic proposition, bear any resemblance to the dynamic flow and interpenetration of processes which we find in the world.

Remembering Ockham's Razor, we can imagine Russell paring down and stripping and lopping, an endless peeling of the onion to find the real onion somewhere inside. It is a special type of philosophical investigation of the "nothing but" kind. Music consists of vibrations of ascertainable frequencies; it is "nothing but" sequences of physical vibrations which can be exactly expressed in numerical form. To get at the real man, isolate him from his house, his car, his wife and family, his friends. Strip off his clothes—is this the real man? No. Strip off skin and flesh, eviscerate him until you reach at last the skeleton. The man at last! As the little boy defined it—"man with all his outside taken off and all his inside taken out."

This kind of analysis, we begin to realise, leaves everything of significance out of account. Yet it cannot be entirely rejected. It goes with a ruthless examination of all that passes for reality, seeking to distinguish the essential from the unessential, from the superficial which misleads and confuses, from the unreal. And surely this is one of the permanent tasks of critical thinking.

In Russell's philosophy we recognise from time to time the value of stripping off the unverifiable and illusory, but when this leads to the fallacy of mistaking abstractions reached only by the intellect for the whole known to experience and not merely known but continuously lived by, we are aware of an intellectualism that is not in the least rational. The whole truth of the world cannot be expressed in "atomic propositions".

Russell adopted a philosophical position known as "realism", which meant in effect that he insisted that all our statements, true or false, refer to a real world of fact which exists independently of any of our thoughts, and that the truth or falsity of what we think is determined by what is or is not the case in the real world, depending in no way on our thoughts themselves.

So far, so good. But in terms of his "logical analysis" Russell tried to arrive at the ultimate constituents of the real world, the ultimate and irreducible facts—and so, like many who had gone before, arrived at an account of the world in which we hardly recognise it as we know it and believe it to be in ordinary experience. And like them, he came up against an irreconcilable contradiction between his theoretical constructions of the facts, and the facts as we actually experience them; between his metaphysical idea of the world deduced by pure logical reasoning (or what he took to be such) and our ideas of the world as arrived at in real life.

As a man of common sense and a disciple of the sciences, Russell wanted to say that the material world of tables, chairs and men, of stars and atoms, exists; and that we know and can find out a lot about it. As a philosopher, on the other hand, he reduces this world to nothing but a bare framework of "atomic facts", and its constituents to nothing but "sense data". But if such is "the real world", what truth can there be in our everyday beliefs about it, or in the theories worked out by the sciences? And what validity can be found in the actual means and methods by which in practice we obtain for ourselves what we always take to be knowledge?

Russell's "realism", his insistence that whatever we find to be the ultimate constituents of known facts must be the real things, led him to the logical conclusion that the ultimate constituents of reality include not only particular things but also "universals". If it is a fact that "this rose is red",

then the universal quality denoted by the word "red" is as much a constituent of the fact and a real thing as is "this rose". Universals like "Redness" may not exist like particular things in space and time, but they are none the less real.

This brings Russell back to the Platonism¹ of his earlier years and also links him with the American "realists" (1912).

They all held that "universals" had an absolutely real existence (or subsistence) and were not merely ideas in our mind, but *objects* of thought. Russell would have no truck with the subjective idealism that believes that to have an idea of something is to know only "the idea in our mind". In his *Problems of Philosophy* he firmly establishes his *realism* over against this subjective idealism. He insists that "the faculty of being acquainted with things other than itself is the main characteristic of a mind". If we are thinking of whiteness, it is "in our mind" only in the sense that we are thinking of whiteness; whiteness itself is not in our mind.

Russell also believed that while we have no direct knowledge of physical objects, but only of sense data, we "instinctively" believe in them, and also in the existence of other minds. Common sense and science transcend the data of direct experience, creating elaborate super-structures whose validity we accept without question. We do transcend the data, and we cannot help transcending them. Russell is fully aware of this. He believes that "All knowledge must be built upon our instinctive beliefs, and if these are rejected, there is nothing left";² and that "There can

¹ For Plato "ideas"—that is to say general ideas—are the universal prototypes of (defective) particular things. They are *real*, which implies that they have an eternal and changeless being and are independent not only of the material things in which they appear, but also of any mind which thinks them. (This became the "Realist" philosophy of medieval thought.)

² *Problems of Philosophy*.

never be any reason for rejecting one instinctive belief except that it clashes with others; so that if they are found to harmonise, the whole system becomes worthy of acceptance.”⁸ Yet Russell’s basic principle was to cut down the number of admissible beliefs to the point where they almost vanish.

It would now appear that having set in motion a process of analysis which threw everything out of the front door, one by one they return through the back, but in the strange guise of instinctive beliefs, subsistent entities, and postulates of inductive inference. We are back where we started from, with one important difference, that all these entities, now recognised as indispensable, are accepted purely in faith. A strange ending to a process of ruthless rational analysis.

This became very clear when Russell tackled the question of the validity of general laws. Hume had demonstrated that you cannot by a process of logical inference pass from a number of facts—however many you may assemble—to a general law. Recognising this, logicians had suggested that we might *assume* the uniformity of nature and *then* a number of similar facts might be taken to indicate a general law. This was generally regarded as unsatisfactory. Russell agreed with Hume; he could not see how, if logic is concerned with the necessary implications of facts and valid inferences from them, you can reach general laws, unobservable entities like electrons, or far-reaching physical theories. The point is a good one, he was not mistaken. You cannot by any process of valid inference known to formal logic infer from any facts a truth that is not already stated, even if not obviously stated. Neither logic nor a computer can do more than sort out your facts, arrange them, extract the relevant information from them, bring together related facts, extract what is actually implicit in them. But all this falls short of establishing a general law or inferring an explanatory theory. Hume had long ago seen this and had denied the

⁸ *Ibid.*

validity of all inferences going *beyond* facts to laws. Laws were *our expectations*, and had a psychological not a logical explanation.

Russell takes up the question again and again. In 1943 he declares that "the problem of inductive inference is still unsolved"; in *Human Knowledge—its Scope and Limits* (1948) he points out that the principle of induction by means of which we pass from particular cases to a general law cannot be claimed as self-evidently valid. Because of this, reasoning in accordance with such a principle has occupied "a very peculiar position in most accounts of scientific inference; it has been considered to be, like the hangman, necessary but unpleasant, and not to be talked of if the subject could possibly be avoided".

Russell is finally reduced to *assuming* the truth of the general principle of induction; because he needs it to satisfy the need for justifying the process of reaching general laws.

This is unsatisfactory because, as was already remarked in Chapter 4, if the rationalist ultimately bases his rational procedures on an act of commitment which has no rational ground, the irrationalist who does the same has a rational excuse for his irrationalism. He can now make any claim to truth that he needs without losing intellectual integrity. Thus the scientist who bases his logical method on an act of faith cannot criticise the holder of a different commitment, who accepts the miraculous, or the creative fiat of the Deity, or whatever.

It must not be supposed that when logical atomism as a system, or a metaphysic even, became involved in more difficulties than advantages, Russell's philosophy collapsed. In the first place, Russell knew the difficulties better than his critics and derived a painful pleasure in wrestling with them. In the second place, Russell never produced a Russellian Philosophy. He advanced one after the other a whole series of philosophies which were seldom consistent with one another. As his thinking developed he moved from one

subject to an allied but different subject and to quite new problems. So that if Russell was the high priest of Logical Atomism, he was also the arch-heretic.

The Problem of Knowing

Russell was always aware of the deeper problems below the case he was arguing, and often saw the difficulties more clearly than many of his critics. "It is a wonderful and admirable thing about Russell how candidly and exhaustively he would raise difficulties about the views he had fathered. His distaste for infanticide would never prevail against his hatred of error."⁴ This was so through the whole of the creative period of his philosophical writing. He frequently expounded a position; felt its defects acutely; rejected it, and moved on to what he felt was a sounder one. In doing so he often did less than justice to the value of his earlier studies. We find him saying of one book that it was "nothing but unmitigated rubbish", of another that it was "complete nonsense", of another that there was nothing valid in it.⁵ It was Russell himself who saw most of the snags in his Logical Atomism and made heroic efforts to overcome them. It fell to self-criticism, not to attack from outside.

One of the problems arising out of his philosophical "realism" was concerned with the independence of the object known in relation to the act of knowing. Russell and the realists made a good point against the idealists when they showed that the mind knows away from itself, and the objects of perception exist independently of being known. Russell made another point, really connected with the first, when he insisted that things were not entirely constituted by the wholes of which they were parts. The parts had qualities of their own and could continue to possess them when separated from other things. The idealist view

⁴ Urmson, *Philosophical Analysis*.

⁵ Russell, *My Philosophical Development*.

seemed to him, and to all the realists, to swallow up the individuality of the part in the whole. He desired its independence and its uniqueness—as a good Whig should.

When he asserted that the object perceived was independent of the perceiver, Russell did not mean that it was out of relation to the perceiver. He only meant out of any relation which would imply dependence on the perceiver for existence. He was insisting on the reality of what is known as something separate from its being known. With this realistic disproof of subjectivism no fault can be found. But the activity of a mental factor in determining what we perceive is too evident a fact to be denied. Perhaps Russell missed it because he was not a working scientist, or anything of a mechanic or creator, not even a gardener. He was essentially an armchair philosopher, however intense the cerebration in that recumbent situation. Every act of cognition is itself a special kind of relationship and determines what is known : the botanist sees something different from the poet in a field of daffodils; the engineer, or builder, who knows how to make things, knows them differently from the man who only uses them. Russell is right about external relationships *not* affecting things. The ship leaves one port and ties up at another without ceasing to be the same ship, and the docks do not change because of a ship's departure either. But the cell or organ in the total organism is functionally related to other cells or other organs and to the life of the whole. It has no independent existence. Nor has the human individual himself apart from the society with which he has been intimately related since birth and apart from other individuals on whom he is dependent and they on him.

Russell's independent relation to the object known is one of passive reception of impressions—an idea which goes back to the first great English empiricist Locke, with his *tabula rasa*—the mind as a blank sheet on which impressions from the outside world fall. Analysis began by dis-

cussing the relation of the sensory evidence of perception to what was known. One recalls with some astonishment the occasions when with Moore and his pupils we used to gaze up at the ceiling, trying to discover whether or not we were directly acquainted with universals, whether, in fact, we could see *whiteness* itself, or only a white expanse of plaster! Some philosophers believed that they perceived sense data first, and through them became acquainted with *another* entity, the physical object. Thus a new kind of object was discovered, namely the sense datum; and at a symposium on the subject, one teacher of philosophy was emphatic that he had observed his pupils having for the first time "the sense-datum experience". But is perception no more than the passive reception of impressions, the observation of sense data?

It was Kant who saw the creative factor in perception, but for him this was the work of the rational categories built into the mind. When Russell rejected Kant it was the intense subjectivity of Kant's theory of knowledge which he disliked, equally with Kant's failure to get at the thing-in-itself. Russell's realism insisted that we *did* know the thing itself; but he never understood that it is possible to hold to that and still see that the conditions of knowing, and the intention and direction of interest in handling, modifying and making things, enter into our knowledge along with the qualities of the material we work with and the things we deal with.

The difficulties in which his realism was to involve him appeared when Russell passed on to the next stage in his philosophical progress—to the Analysis of Matter. It was to become clear as he proceeded to develop his "realistic" metaphysics that no consistent system can be built on the principles of analysis which are basic for his thinking, or on his doctrine of external relations and the independence of the known object from the subject.

Before we leave the Russell of logical atomism we may

wish to ask whether a philosophical position which has been shown to be untenable was ever worth the trouble of thinking it out, and whether it has any significance for us today. Indeed it has. Almost every position which Russell advanced had importance in what it denied as well as in what it affirmed. The criticism it evoked itself carried philosophy on to new understanding. Russell compelled philosophers to look more carefully at their language, at *exactly* what they were saying. His attempt to establish logical atomism introduced a new rigour into philosophical discussion. On the whole it strengthened the position of the empiricists who were proceeding in the other direction from his purely logical studies and were concerned with the validity of statements which could be verified by observation and experiment rather than the logical puzzles which even Russell himself failed to elucidate.

But in the field of logical analysis itself Russell had started something which others were to develop. He had set Wittgenstein on the path that led to the *Tractatus*. After ten more years at Cambridge, Wittgenstein was to abandon the logical positivism of that work and break entirely new ground with the themes subsequently expounded in his *Philosophical Investigations*. The work of Wittgenstein, which derives directly from Russell, was to prove one of the most influential philosophical positions of the century, and from it stems the Analytical Philosophy of our times.

6

MIND AND MATTER

If there is one philosopher we constantly recall when reading Russell it can be none other than Descartes. He was a mathematician, the discoverer of analytical geometry, and a logician; he wrote with incomparable lucidity and charm—the first Frenchman to write philosophy in his native tongue. Disgusted with the confusion of the academics he wanted to secure the clarity and certainty of mathematical reasoning in the field of philosophy by using the strict logical methods which worked so well in mathematics. How extraordinarily like Russell's own programme !

But of course there were great differences. Descartes thought that mathematics was not only the province of absolute truth, but like Galileo and Newton he thought that "God geometrises", and that the framework of the material world was mathematical. Russell, on the contrary, knew that the postulates of mathematics were of human construction and held for material reality only within certain limits. Descartes also required *two* ultimate realities—matter and mind, which had nothing to do with one another and could not interact; a position which left his successors enough headaches to last them for three hundred years. And then, he found the basis of absolute certainty, in both the material and the mental world, in what he called "clear and distinct ideas". These he thought were absolutely indisputable and must obtain universal assent. They turned out to be far from certain, and open to radical disagree-

ment. Philosophical speculation has been busy with the obscurities of his clear ideas ever since he wrote. That, I suppose, is why he has been called the father of modern philosophy.

So Descartes was very badly wrong, on all counts. But cynicism is entirely out of place here. By removing from the physical world every element of mentality—all the agencies, forces, interferences of spiritual entities—he established the independence of physics and the universality in that field of the measurable and the quantitative. In other respects too his very errors proved enlightening, stimulating and fertile. But that is another story.

His dichotomy of all reality into two ultimate realities—matter whose only properties are to occupy space and to move, and mind whose only property is to think—was one of the boldest speculative theories ever to be propounded. It created a dualism that has only been overcome successfully in our own time. Until then the fallacy of “the ghost in the machine”, as Professor Ryle aptly describes it, created insoluble problems. These problems Russell attempted to solve in his two most important philosophical works : *The Analysis of Matter*, and *The Analysis of Mind*.

The Analysis of Matter

Russell, under the influence of Bradley and McTaggart, had inclined to the idealist philosophy in his undergraduate days. As propounded by Bishop Berkley it declared that since we only perceive colours, sounds, smells and tactile sensations, and these are all in the mind, we can have no knowledge of an external world. It is obvious, Berkeley argues, that “all the choir of heaven and furniture of the earth, in a word all those bodies which compose the mighty frame of the world, have not any subsistence without a mind, their *being* is to be perceived; that consequently so long as they are not actually perceived by me, or do not exist in my mind or that of any other created spirit, they must either

have no existence at all, or else subsist in the mind of some eternal spirit.”¹

Berkeley did not of course deny for a moment the real existence of solid, coloured things in space, which we can handle. As he says, by his idealist theory “we are not deprived of any one thing in nature. Whatever we see, feel, hear, or anywise conceive or understand, remains as secure as ever, and is as real as ever”. So that Dr. Johnson did not refute Berkeley by kicking a stone with great force and saying “I refute it thus”. In fact many philosophers have said that the theory is impossible to refute, but at the same time nobody believes it. To the objection that if a thing ceases to be perceived it is no longer anywhere, Berkeley replied that God always perceives everything. “If there were no God, what we take to be material objects would have a jerky life, suddenly leaping into being when we look at them.”² As it is they have a continuous existence owing to God’s perceptions. Russell proceeds to quote Ronald Knox’s limericks which admirably set forth the idealist case :

There was a young man who said, “God
Must think it exceedingly odd
If he finds that this tree
Continues to be
When there’s no-one about in the Quad.”

To which comes the Berkeleyan reply :

Dear Sir, Your astonishment’s odd,
I am always about in the Quad.
And that’s why the tree
Will continue to be,
Since observed by

Yours faithfully,

GOD.

¹ Berkeley, *Principles of Human Knowledge*.

² Russell, *History of Western Philosophy*.

It was necessary, if Russell was not to remain permanently in bondage to idealism and write no more philosophy, to refute idealism. This he begins to do in his *Problems of Philosophy*.

He has some amusing things to say about perceptual cats which never get hungry while they are not perceived. Then he goes on to show that Berkeley is confusing the thing apprehended with the act of apprehension. "In the mind" only implies that we cannot be aware of the existence of anything without thinking about it, that is, we apprehend it *by the mind*; but that does not mean that what we apprehend is *in the mind*. Being "in the mind" only means being an object for mind, or being thought of. It does not follow from our perceiving things that the things we perceive are actually mental states—bits of mind, as it were. We can in fact only think of something because it is something other than our thought about it. In fact we define mind as "*that which possesses the characteristic of becoming acquainted with things other than itself*".³

But by what processes do we become aware of physical objects? What we know by acquaintance is not the object itself but a number of sense data.⁴ We perceive hardness, smoothness, brownness and so forth. These become the ultimate terms or elements of our analysis of the external world. The material thing is a construct from such sensations. There is no need to postulate or "infer" the existence of "the thing" in addition to the sensations, but neither can its existence be reduced simply to that of the momentary sensations of any particular person at a particular time. Those sensations would be said to reveal only one momentary "aspect" of the thing, whereas other sensations would correspond to other aspects. The thing is therefore to be defined as the totality (or "class") of all its possible aspects, or in other words, of all possible sense data deriving from it. "All aspects of things

³ *The Problems of Philosophy*. (1912).

⁴ *The Analysis of Matter*. (1927).

are real, whereas the thing is a mere logical construction."

For example a star is just the appearances or aspects of the star which different people in different places see, and which would be thrown on the sensitised plates of cameras wherever cameras might be. It is unnecessary to add a real star as the source from which these aspects come. Where and what are these aspects? They are at every point at which a visual image, in eye or on camera plate, would be possible.

Some of us can remember Russell lecturing some time in 1915 or 1916 about what we perceive when we perceive a penny. He pulled a penny out of his pocket and held it up for us to see. We gazed at it hypnotically. He turned it over and whirled it around. We followed his every move. What do we perceive, he asked, when we perceive a penny? It appears, really, as a series of little, two-dimensional elliptical discs which run out to us like buttons on a wire. There are rows of such discs running out in all directions to all possible observers. Then he said that the penny that *we* saw was smaller than the penny *he* saw, though to us it didn't look smaller than pennies usually are. Finally he told us that the collection of all possible aspects was the only real penny. Though how we were to correlate so many things he didn't tell us. Instead, he gave the penny a final twirl in the air and put it back in his pocket, at which we all gasped. For just what it was he was putting in his pocket had by this time become an ineffable mystery.

Russell created some amusement on another occasion when he said that Leibnitz would have been surprised to discover that "the end of his nose was a colony of spiritual beings."⁵ But surely it is just as startling to discover that the end of one's nose is a six-dimensional manifold of Russell perspectives!

We see, then, that it is the aspects of the thing that are

⁵ A view which follows from Leibnitz's theory of the world as constituted by spiritual atoms or monads.

real, whereas the thing itself is a logical construction. The theory indicates a considerable development of Russell's earlier views about the plain recognition of perceived objects existing beyond the knowing mind. He is now averse from admitting the existence of any entities other than the sense data which we experience in sensation.

A curious consequence of this theory of perspectives is that the world really consists of the totality of views of it from all the places from which it could be seen; whether at these places are cameras or minds, there must be a special and peculiar view of the world from that place. Aspects of the world exist from all possible points of view, although no observer need necessarily be perceiving them. It follows that each aspect of the world which is presented to a different viewpoint in space is independent of mind in respect of its existence, and an external reality is therefore established which is non-mental.

This almost reverses the common-sense view for which any object, such as a star, is a real physical object and its appearances to different people are merely appearances. But on Russell's view, the appearances are the reality, and the star a construction made from them.

This, however, is only the beginning of Russell's enquiry. Everything that has been said points forward to the next step in his analysis—to the analysis of mind.

The Analysis of Mind

Hume, when he considered the mind as that which perceives, could never find it by inspection. There was nothing there but the sensations themselves. They did not appear to *inhere* in a spiritual substance—like pins in a pin cushion. Hume concluded that there was no such thing. However, as a critic observed, that was rather like a man looking in at his own window and, seeing nobody in the room, concluding that he didn't exist.

Russell went much farther than Hume. Not only are

minds logical constructions out of sense data, but *they are logical constructions out of the same sense data that make up physical objects*. Russell abolishes the distinction between our experiencing sensations and the sense data we experience.⁶

Consciousness as a function of mind disappears. It is found to consist of a certain complex of sensations and images related in a certain way. Only in such a group do we find what we call consciousness. Our sense data are so little in themselves states of consciousness that they are in fact the constituents of the material world, although they are also the constituents of mind. A patch of colour and our sensation in seeing it are identical.

This brings us back to Descartes' dualism : the *two ultimate realities, mind and matter, "the ghost in the machine"*. Philosophers have tried desperately to resolve this duality into a more fundamental unity, and in so doing to bring the whole realm of existence under a common formula. They found they could only succeed by abolishing either mind or matter. The materialists abolish mind, making it a mere epiphenomenon, a glow on the surface of things—the froth on the beer. The idealists abolish matter in the manner of Bishop Berkeley. But, as Russell pointed out, strange things are going on today. Under the influence of modern physics matter has been growing less material. Under the influence of behaviourist psychology, the mind is becoming less mental. It is therefore not difficult to abolish the distinction by regarding sense data as what Russell calls “neutral particulars”; the word “neutral” suggesting that they are in themselves neither mental nor material.

These sense data are arranged in different contexts. Taken in one context and arranged as the series of sensations at the locus of my head and as a time sequence within it, they can be regarded as psychological and constitute the elements of that kind of logical construct we call a mind. Taken in

* *The Analysis of Mind* (1921).

another way and lifted out of the mental series as an aspect of an object, and combined with all the other aspects from every imaginable point of view, they can be regarded as physical and as elements of that logical construct we call a physical object.

The Return to Solipsism

Solipsism is the view, to which idealists are prone, that everything we know or can know consists in the ideas and sensations in our minds. The individual self of the solipsistic philosopher is therefore the whole of reality, and the external world *and other persons* are modifications of the single mind, or phenomena (appearances) within it having no independent existence.

This is such a very attractive theory to certain people, so obvious, so impossible to refute, that one such person remarked how strange it was that everybody did not believe it!

Now if the only objects with which we are directly acquainted—and this is not only the conclusion of the analysis of matter and the analysis of mind, but also the basic principle of logical atomism—are essentially private to the person who has them, how can we come to know the external world and other people? We certainly *believe* objects to exist and our friends to be real persons, but these are inferences from subjective experiences. We are in a closed chamber looking at pictures on a screen which we would like to think relate directly to actual objects and persons.⁷

The pictures, Russell would say, are *caused by* a chain of events beginning with light reflected from the object and falling on the retina, continuing as a succession of electro-

⁷ And reverting to the view that we construct our picture of the world out of atomic propositions reflecting sense data, the totality of atomic propositions intelligible to me is intelligible to no-one else—for these are based solely on *my* sense data. Any communication is impossible.

chemical disturbances passing up a nerve, and ending in the agitation of the molecules in a group of cortical neurones in the occipital region of the brain. If that is the case, then this disturbance is a succession of mental events or sensations.

But why in the world should I suppose that the last effect resembles the first occurrence in the physical world which started the process resulting in a sensation? But this is precisely Russell's theory. "Everything that we can directly observe of the physical world happens inside our heads and consists of mental events." This is odd. It sounds, as just stated physiological, even materialistic, but it ends up as something indistinguishable from idealism.

But by a curious inconsistency, as Whitehead has pointed out,⁸ the same people who express themselves as though bodies, brains and nerves were the only real things in an entirely imaginary world of sensations within the closed chamber of the mind base all their evidence on physiological facts and experiments which assume the reality of bodies, brains, nerves and microscopes and the actual existence of human bodies. But our evidence for the brains and light waves and retinas and nerves and cortical neurones which we accept as absolutely real in order to prove our theory, is of exactly the same type as our evidence for the external world of which, they say, we have no certain knowledge. Russell is treating perception on materialist principles in order to see the rest of the world from the idealist point of view; and it won't do.

It is a most curious argument and a surprising one for so acute a logician as Bertrand Russell.

The plain fact is that it is only because Russell *knows first* that there are external objects and proceeds to argue on the basis of the evidence they provide him with, basing his whole argument on what *he tells us* is going on in a real, material world, that he is able to infer that our knowledge

⁸ Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World*.

consists only of sense data and to prove that nothing else exists.

The argument is, from the other end, so to speak, only Bishop Berkeley all over again. Russell, like the bishop, confuses perceiving and the thing perceived, perception and the brain event. He fails to understand that we do not perceive perceptions, or even brain events; we perceive objects. To quote the earlier Russell once again against the later Russell: "The faculty of being acquainted with things other than itself is the main characteristic of a mind."

The Mind in Action

Russell's own disinclination for the manipulative activities of the physical laboratory and his preference for armchair speculation must have something to do with the *cul de sac* into which his analysis of mind and matter has led him. Maurice Cornforth has shown how "the general philosophy of empiricism takes a view wherein knowledge arises simply from the passive contemplation of given facts by the individual mind; not from the interaction of the knowers and the known, those who gain knowledge being themselves a part of the world, and gaining knowledge through the practical activity of changing the world."⁹

Empiricism condemns itself to failure by an error closely associated with the idea of passive reception of sensations. Descartes believed that the mind knows itself more easily and more certainly than it knows objects. We have here the root of the fallacious subjectivism which ends up in Hume's scepticism and Russell's solipsism, the view that each person is shut up in his own thoughts and knows only himself and his sensations and not the external world and other people. This naturally creates an insoluble problem. How can the mind get outside itself to the real physical world when it is forever shut up inside its own walls? If this is assumed as obviously true, then step by step, how-

⁹ Cornforth, *Science versus Idealism*.

ever subtle our arguments, we get deeper and deeper into hopeless confusion. But the assumption is as unnecessary as it is false. We do *not* know, primarily, the mind and its interests. We know *away* from the mind. If we start with Descartes and Locke, who made the same assumption, we are bound to end up with Hume and Russell; and, moreover, we can know nothing whatever about the basic structure of the world. Yet it is just that that we most need to know, not for philosophical purposes, but to control it and satisfy human need.

It was through biology on the one hand, and through the great development of the sciences when they passed from the laboratory to the field of engineering and industry on the other, that it became clear where idealism had gone wrong. "If we regard man as a biological creature actively adjusting himself to an environment, and experience not as a picture in the mind but such a process of adjustment, and knowledge, not as a copy of a real world, but as a definite relation between an intelligent organism and its environment, then the problem is transformed, and, set in new terms, is possible of solution."¹⁰

And to this we can add that we *begin* with knowledge of the external world, and have no need to prove it, or *assume* it. What we have to do is to find out when we are mistaken as to facts about it, illusions about it, and theories about it; and sometimes, whether what we think we know is real or some form of hallucination. We *correct* our knowledge by our critical methods, which are many and various, ranging from common sense to psychiatry, and from scientific experiments to the critical procedures whereby we reject and accept far-ranging theories. We do not have to *prove* ultimate truth, a procedure leading to infinite regress. We have to disprove error, and what cannot be disproved or refuted experimentally remains thus far true, but always liable to modification in the face of further tests. These sometimes

¹⁰ J. H. Randall, *The Making of the Modern Mind*.

correct it and sometimes compel us to change the theory, extending its range and therefore getting nearer to the truth than in its earlier form.

Russell's analytical method has persuaded him that things we take to be real—green grass, hard stones, cold snow—are not so.¹¹ To imagine so is, he says, “naïve realism, i.e. the doctrine that things are what they seem”. But realism is not “naïve realism”. It is well aware that there are illusions and other misleading appearances. These may be detected and we must, as realists, *proceed critically* in determining what is real. But the result is not to dispel all realistic knowledge; on the contrary the grass remains green, stones are hard, and we continue to believe that snow is cold.

Russell is constantly falling into the mistake of reducing such knowledge to end effects in the brain. He speaks of science “at war with itself”, “finding itself plunged into subjectivity”. But whatever may be involved in the series of events which lead to the perception of external objects with their qualities, as perceived under certain specified conditions, this does not in the least lessen the reality with which in the event we are dealing on the level of ordinary experience. On that level the stone not only appears to be hard, it *is* hard; and the grass is *really* green. The fact that we can discover the sequence of events leading up to what occurs on the level of ordinary experience does not invalidate that experience, any more than a chemical analysis of the paints of Rubens' “Judgment of Paris” demonstrates that the painting itself is an illusion, and that in reality it consists only of certain compounds of iron, copper and cobalt.

We must not allow the physicist or the physiologist or the logician to make a metaphysic out of a method. The object of the method is to give us greater understanding of the natural world so that we can control it and use it on the level of everyday life. Science does not diminish reality. Its

¹¹ *An Inquiry into Meaning and Truth.*

aim is not to make the world disappear, but to serve human needs. Reality is not impugned by the discovery of the micro-structure of matter or the physiological processes of perception. Physiological techniques are not engaged in for the purpose of demonstrating that all reality exists in our heads or in our minds, or to establish any other metaphysical doctrine, but to further the ability of medicine to deal with human ills, to improve the health of real people with real bodies in a real material world.

In his Introduction to Lange's *History of Materialism* Russell discusses the change brought about by scientists in our understanding of the nature of matter. "The old solidity is gone and with it the characteristics that made it seem more real than fleeting thoughts." In his *Outline of Philosophy* he says that we cannot any longer believe that we can feel the solidity of material objects. We cannot, for instance, press our fingers against a table and feel its hardness. This is because it consists of electrons and protons which are only collections of radiation processes. Therefore although *you think you are touching the table*, this is not the case.

But surely you do not think *mistakenly* that you are touching the table? If "touching" is impossible, how do we come to use the word? how do we know what "touching" means? All that Russell can say is that the physicist no longer believes that solid objects *consist* of small hard particles; but that is not to say that the table is no longer a solid object.

Scientific work must of course abstract certain elements and factors from the complexity of the whole, and must descend below the level of everyday experience; it must isolate certain aspects, detaching them from the complex situation in which they normally occur. But ultimately the scientist returns to concrete realities with his knowledge of structure and law. "The physicist deals with a selection of the properties of what there is in the world, and his success in investigation depends upon his isolating those properties

and considering them on their own account."¹² He is not concerned with *tables*, and his job is not to persuade us that they do not exist.

Russell always seems to be trying to establish a complete divorce between physical theories and their application. He fails to see that while in the process of getting useful theories *physics* becomes more abstract, the world itself has not become abstract. It remains as it is.

¹² Stebbing, *Philosophy and the Physicists*.

7

"YOU'RE RIGHT IF YOU THINK YOU ARE"

Russell's *Autobiography* opens with a Prologue entitled *What I have Lived for*. "Three passions," he says, "simple but overwhelmingly strong, have governed my life: the longing for love, the search for knowledge, and unbearable pity for the suffering of mankind. These passions, like great winds, have blown me hither and thither, on a wayward course, over a deep ocean of anguish, reaching to the very verge of despair."

He elaborates these compelling ideals, and tells us that while love and truth often left him above the earth, pity brings him back to it. "Echoes of pain reverberate in my heart. Children in famine, victims tortured by oppressors, and the whole world of loneliness, poverty and pain make a mockery of what human life should be. I long to alleviate the evil."

We do not wish for a moment to question such a faith or to cavil at any of these words. It is because Russell proceeds to analyse his own moral convictions in a manner which seems to undermine them, because he is convinced that reason can play no part in leading us to moral truth, clarifying and strengthening our moral aims, that on ethical grounds his moral philosophy seems inadequate and unphilosophical.

It is often supposed—indeed Russell seems to suppose so—that a strong moral conviction must not be questioned, can-

not be questioned; that in its presence reason is bidden to be silent. The assumption always is that moral convictions are invariably noble, true, authoritative and are only challenged by cynics, sophists and the wicked. Unfortunately that is not the case. Many practices which Russell, and most of those he would call enlightened, detest as evil are accepted, believed and defended by those whose sincerity cannot be doubted. It is a poor argument to say that anyone who doubts our moral code and accepts one we regard as morally wrong *must* be insincere, lying, self-deceived, dangerously wicked. That is the moral dogmatism that leads to tyranny and persecution. But if two moral judgments are in complete opposition, not merely as being different, but as declaring from each point of view that the other is saying "evil be thou my good", then must we not find some means of criticising and testing moral standards, moral judgments? Russell denies this absolutely. A most surprising attitude in a philosopher who has devoted all his powers to demonstrating "that it is undesirable to believe a proposition when there is no ground whatever for supposing it true", who has brought scrupulous rational analysis to bear on accepted judgments on human beliefs, on unexamined customs and habits!

"The unexamined life," said Plato, "is not worth living"; and he meant above all human behaviour, moral codes, the opinions by which men live. Is Russell exempting the moral life from examination? Are the grounds of moral propositions never to be examined and questioned? This is one of the great ages of cant and fantasy. It is supremely in the moral sphere that we want neither dogmatism nor expediency but the uncompromising intellectual honesty that Russell has displayed in every other field of life and thought that he has examined.

Yet when Russell comes to examine values, to discuss the moral law, he declares that all values lie outside the realm of truth and falsehood. They are not found in the external

world, as many philosophers have believed; and "since no way can be even imagined for deciding a difference as to values, the conclusion is forced upon us that the difference is one of tastes, not one as to any objective truth. When we assert that this or that has value, we are giving expression to our own emotions, not to a fact that would still be true if our personal feelings were different."¹ If that is so then every other man has as much right to his emotionally induced values, even if they involve the overthrow of ours. Russell proceeds to argue that reason has nothing to do with our values, our goals in life, our ends, our ultimate standards, but only with our choice of the means to attain them. "Science can only deal with means, not with ends; the ends must be supplied by feeling. For my part there are certain things that I value; I should mention especially intelligence, kindness and self-respect. Science cannot prove that these things are good; it can only show how, assuming them to be good, they are to be obtained. In matters of fact, the premisses come from perception; in matters of value, from feeling. A man is not unscientific because of his ultimate ends, but because of mistakes as to how to achieve them."² This would no doubt apply to Hitler, who was unfortunate enough to miscalculate the effectiveness of the means to ends which we have no right to question.

We must not suppose that in taking this subjective attitude to morals Russell is less than serious. He holds this position because as a philosopher he finds no rational grounds for ethical judgments. Yet he himself admits that he cannot be consistent about this position, for again and again he treats his moral convictions as categorical imperatives obligatory for all men. He obviously believes that so far from his pity for "children in famine" being merely a matter of taste, it is something all men ought to feel, as he declares over and over again. And on such questions as

¹ A Broadcast, printed in *The Listener*, Sep. 23rd 1948.

² *Ibid.*

war, the atomic bomb, and so on he eloquently urges us all to believe with him and act with him. Behind this ethical passion is obviously a conviction that humanitarian ends are objectively right and true for all men. It is this inconsistency that is not only surprising but regrettable. There are too many people today who would like to believe that moral obligation is subjective, relative and groundless, a matter of convention, or sentiment. Others like the Athenians at Melos reply to appeals to justice and pity : "In this world the strong do what they can, and the weak do what they must." When Burke denounced the French Revolution and demanded pity for the outraged nobility, Tom Paine replied : "You pity the plumage and forget the dying bird." Why pity the dying bird, why pity "children in famine", if your strong inclination is to pity the plumage ?

The subjectivity of moral judgments has, in fact, been seriously and ably defended by moral philosophers, and is far from being a mere matter of academic quibbling. Russell is by no means alone in this belief, it was strongly supported by his Cambridge friend and colleague Moore, and is today defended by Ayer, Stevenson and many others. In 1903, the same year in which Russell published *The Principles of Mathematics*, G. E. Moore published his influential *Principia Ethica*. Russell frequently speaks of the great influence Moore had on his philosophical outlook. It was Moore who directed his "realist" criticism against idealism, established the analytical method in philosophy, and demanded ruthless precision in definition and verbal usage. This was the strength of his ethical criticism and of his great influence on Cambridge philosophy. His point was that the value we set upon anything is not to be defined or explained in terms of the thing's own properties, which do not in themselves imply any value. You cannot extract an ethical quality out of non-ethical facts. It is therefore a "non-natural" quality, itself undefinable (like a colour), which we attach to something—good food, a picture, health, sex. It is itself

equivalent as a non-natural quality to a natural quality, like yellow; but it is perceived by a *faculty for the apprehension of this moral quality*, which is different from the faculty by which we apprehend natural qualities.⁸

Moore influenced not only Russell, but Maynard Keynes, Lytton Strachey, Clive Bell, E. M. Forster and others who came to be known as the Bloomsbury Group. Good, they all came to believe, cannot be defined. To be aware of goodness is a state of mind that is unique. It is distinct from the pleasurable, the desirable, from what we approve. When we say that something is good we have before the mind a unique property of that thing—its goodness.⁹

Moore points out, and it would be quite impossible for Russell to disagree with him on the basis of his own subjective grounds for moral belief, that when one man says "This is right", and another answers "No, it is not right", "each of them is always merely making an assertion about *his own* feelings. It plainly follows that there is never any difference of opinion between them: the one of them is never really contradicting what the other is asserting. They are no more contradicting one another than if, when one had said, 'I like sugar', the other had answered, 'I *don't* like sugar.' In such a case there is, of course, no conflict of opinion, no contradiction of one by the other: for it may perfectly well be the case that what each asserts is equally

⁸ A distinction may be drawn between Moore's apprehension of the good as a quality of things recognised by a special faculty, and Russell's infallible intuition of moral truth. One lays the emphasis on "good" as an objective quality, the other on the subjective conviction; but both reject *reason* as a necessary factor in reaching a moral judgment.

⁹ This position is fundamentally the "intuitionist" theory of ethical judgment, one of those things for which no proof is required and none is available. Later Ayer and Stevenson advanced the "emotive" theory which held that a moral statement does no more than express one's ethical feelings. It was then added that such expressions of emotion may arouse feelings in others and so stimulate action. Thus we arrive at the *dynamic* in addition to the *expressive* meaning of moral words.

true.”⁸ The one man *does* like sugar; the other man *doesn't*. The one therefore is never denying what the other is asserting. This is equally the case with respect to moral judgments; the one is *never* denying what the other is asserting, he does not deny that the second man feels that the action in question is *not* wrong. This involves “the very curious consequence that no two men can ever differ in opinion as to whether an action is right or wrong.”⁹

Moral judgments that are settled by intuition are unreliable and variable. In Russell's own experience they have proved reversible. In the Munich period he was a fervent pacifist and brought his powerful influence to bear on the side of appeasement.¹ He advocated “the existence of a single supreme government”, and opposed any alliance with Russia. But when war came he reversed his position and supported the war. He now gives his full support to Nuclear Disarmament but in 1946 he advocated an atomic war against Russia. He declared that “either we must have a war against Russia before she has the atom bomb or we will have to lie down and let them govern us.” He advocated presenting Russia with an ultimatum, and when she refused as she was sure to do, then we should use the atom bomb. A successful war against Russia, he affirms, “would produce a renaissance of hope and joy and creativeness, a great leap of the human spirit, leading to a new achievement in art, in science, in politics, and in the organisation of a humane way of life.”²

The ethical problem is not to be solved by absolute judgments based on intuition. The divorce of fact and value, for which Moore was largely responsible, is a mistake. Facts, reason, and the combination of individual judgment and

⁸ Moore, *Ethics*.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹ *Which Way to Peace?*

² *Morning News*, May 28th 1949 (Published by the Allied Commission in Austria). Russell admitted his advocacy of such an atomic war in his *Face to Face* interview with John Freeman.

social discussion based on general experience are among the factors necessary for moral decisions and the formation of criteria of value—but they are never absolute.

When moral principles are advanced dogmatically and irrationally, on the basis of emotion and intuition, they are similar to the religious dogmas which have been responsible for devastating wars and all the horrors of persecution. E. M. Forster once said “The man who believes because he feels it in his bones is not really very far removed from the man who believes it on the authority of a policeman’s truncheon”, and one might add, is himself prepared to enforce his views by the same means.

Russell’s conviction that “science can deal only with means, not with ends; the ends must be supplied by feeling”⁹ not only misses the vital importance of science in medicine and psychology, as well as in matters of scientific agriculture and the physical sciences, in helping to decide on our goals, but is at variance with that tolerance which depends on rational judgment not the blind authority of passionate feeling. “Dogmatists,” says Russell, “fear that free discussion would show their beliefs to be groundless.” But there can be no discussion on the basis of subjective feelings, as Moore and Ayer have clearly shown.

Russell has always opposed religious dogmatism, which he defines as a “set of beliefs held as dogmas, dominating the conduct of life, going beyond or contrary to the evidence”. But in the field of morals and politics Russell admits that his own beliefs go beyond the evidence since they are not reached by reason but by intuition. By removing morals from the sphere of reason and scientific investigation, all he can say about them is that they are his own. In that case, in terms of his own definition, they are as dogmatic as the religious beliefs he condemns.

Russell has criticised philosophers who reason about the universe with a strong inclination to interpret it in line

⁹ *Scepticism and Tolerance—in The Western Tradition* (1949).

with their own preferences. He is indeed correct. Philosophy began in the separation of rational enquiry from emotionally held intuition. That was why Plato was critical of the poets of his day who offered as "truths" the products of their own excited imaginations. Philosophy has ever since been unwilling to exalt convictions which are merely felt to the level of convictions which can be shown to be reasonable.

Hence when Russell comes to us to display his talents and proclaim his inspired moral truths, we are tempted to treat him as the citizen of Plato's Republic treated the poet, paying him reverence as a sacred, admirable and charming personage, but sending him away to another city after pouring perfumed oil on his head and crowning him with woollen fillets. Having learned a tolerance which Plato did not possess, we shall not send him away, but we shall certainly point out to him that his message is not sufficient for our contemporary needs, and that, while we owe him a great debt, both for his instruction and for entertainment, we must, as regards moral and social enlightenment, turn from him and look for something of greater weight and substance.

8

MAN AND HIS FREEDOM

In his *Roads to Freedom* (1960) Russell affirms that faith in the development of the freedom, individuality and self-expression of the individual which runs through everything that he said and wrote on the social question.

"It is the individual in whom all that is good must be realised, and the free growth of the individual must be the supreme end of a political system which is to refashion the world."

We are aware in everything he writes of the humanitarian passion and the concern for the release of the spirit from every kind of limitation, from all tyranny and repression. This is Russell the man. But we are none the less compelled to relate this to the child who was the father of the man; and the *Autobiography* makes clear the environmental influences that went to the making of the humanist as well as the philosopher.

In his *History of Western Philosophy* Russell says that it was one of his principal aims "to exhibit each philosopher as the outcome of his milieu, a man in whom were crystallized and concentrated thoughts and feelings which, in a vague and diffused form, were common to the community of which he was a part". That community was for his own development the great Whig family of the Russells and the wide circle of scholarly aristocrats and public men who were either closely related or on intimate terms with his father's family or his mother's—the Stanleys.

He has described himself as the last survivor of a dead epoch, an eminent Victorian born too late. When he met Keynes and Lytton Strachey at Cambridge, he says that while he and his friends were Victorians, they, the generation of ten years later, were Edwardians who "aimed at a life of retirement among fine shades and nice feelings, and conceived of the good as consisting in the passionate mutual admirations of a clique of the élite".¹ He, however, was still seriously concerned with the politics of progress and the welfare of people. His discerning and critical mind was vexed and dismayed by all that could be seen around him, and he became a devastating critic of our present discontents.

But behind this concern we cannot miss the outlines of the philosophical individualism of the Whig party, of the eighteenth century radicals, of Bentham, Adam Smith, and, farther back, even Locke and Leibnitz—Adam Smith who objected to any interference with individual liberty, Leibnitz who saw the world as a collection of *monads*, separate entities existing independently of each other and only related by a "pre-established harmony", a remarkable anticipation of Russell's logical atomism and his pluralist philosophy. This powerful tendency reflected the rise to independence and power of the new merchant and industrial classes. Typically, one of the literary heroes of the time was none other than Robinson Crusoe, all alone on his island, flourishing purely on the basis of individual enterprise and his Protestant faith.

His Protestant faith—for religion had a hand in this exaltation of the individual, as Tawney shows. The new moral and economic ideology was powerfully aided by the Protestant ethic which came to strengthen and inspire the social order that followed monarchical feudalism. The medieval conception of the social order as a highly integrated organism, each member contributing to the common

¹ *Autobiography*.

good, was shattered and its individual members dispersed as mere units each seeking his own happiness.

Luther saw the authority of custom, law and statute replaced by the regenerated soul of the saved man welling up to live the godly life. The ultimate entity was the individual who had made his personal peace with God. Thereafter his own faith and conscience revealed to him God's truth. In the liberty to read the Scriptures and learn what he might from them sprang a new rationalism which developed into both religious and political liberalism. A new faith in human life sprang from a trust in man's impulses, when purified from sin, which had its counterpart in the faith of the humanists. The followers of Calvin journeyed through theocracy to a conception of civil liberty and the first elements of democracy, exemplified in the City Republic of Geneva. Thus, in spite of dogmatism and theological obscurantism, the authority of the individual conscience and reason sprang from the Reformation, and 19th century Liberalism was inspired by the faith of the Dissenters. Once this spirit escaped from its theological trammels it found expression in a rationalism that carried it far beyond the limits of Biblical Christianity.

There was much of this notion of each man finding salvation through personal faith, through his own reason and the authority of his own impulses, in the intellectual environment in which the Russell family lived and in which Bertrand Russell was nurtured. His "godfather" was John Stuart Mill, the saint of rationalism.

His *Principles of Social Reconstruction* is built round the fundamental notion of impulse. It is impulse, far more than conscious desire or reason, which provides the real springs of human actions. If a man can follow his impulses freely he will tend so far to be happy; if he is prevented from following them, he will be unhappy, frustrated. This is the fatal weakness of our civilisation, Russell says. Personality and individuality are crushed into conformity. Freedom is

the supreme good; for without it personality is impossible.

One can guess at once the theme of the books that followed: *Roads to Freedom* (1918), *How to be Free and Happy* (1924), *On Education, especially in Early Childhood* (1926), *Marriage and Morals* (1929). Much of this is startling and challenging, all of it brilliantly written. In the *Sceptical Essays* Russell deals pungently with the threat to the individual of social authority. Some law is indeed necessary, but "the growth of one individual or one community is to be as little as possible at the expense of the other". Russell pours into his social philosophy the mysticism and the sentiment which he had so resolutely repressed in his attitude towards metaphysics and religion. The philosopher who had tried to be a disembodied intellect was really a bundle of feelings and moral passion.

He could be something more than a prophet of happiness and freedom. He could wield a polemical pen that stabbed and he had a scorn and a wrath that seared. He was indeed an exceedingly complicated personality driven by a passionate need for simplicity and clarity, which was responsible for his lucid prose style, but also for his tendency to oversimplify. His temperament could also make of him a rather supercilious pamphleteer, sinking to trivial arguments, glaring exaggerations and prejudicially selected instances. His simplifications, his savage wit, combined with his animosity and a desire to score off his opponents, could make him a dangerous and unattractive foe.² Sometimes his great love of mankind could be combined with a contemptuous hatred for most individual men.

There was always something lacking in his social and political writing. It was reason, philosophy, the rigorous discipline of sound scholarship, which in many considerable writers and philosophers by no means implied lack of heart.

² Especially perhaps in his *Why I am not a Christian* (1927), and *Has Religion Made Useful Contributions to Civilisation?* (1930) and also his *Unpopular Essays* (1950).

But just as his ethics was purely a matter of feeling, deliberately cut off from reason, and his philosophy was, as deliberately, the cult of pure abstraction and expressed in the terms of mathematical logic, so his moral exhortation was more passionate than informed, and more polemical than logical. None of his sociological works represents the exact conclusions of scientific thinking. There is in fact no evidence at all of any previous social thinkers being studied. He offers no clear definition of that elusive concept, liberty. He never realises that the only useful discussion of this issue must avoid the simple dichotomy of society and the individual, authority and freedom; for they are not necessarily antithetical.

Both his wisdom and his failure to think clearly on social questions are very clearly displayed in his Reith Lectures on *Authority and the Individual* (1949). Here the first two lectures sketch the development of social cohesion from primitive times down to the appearance of centralised government. Then he returns to the familiar emphasis on the supreme value of the individual, and above all the value of individual initiative, firstly for the happiness of the individual himself, and secondly for the benefit of the community which needs the best he can give it.

Russell's conception of liberty is the very common one, so convincingly expounded by John Stuart Mill,⁸ that liberty means the removal of constraints, of interference, of oppressive legal restrictions, of the social pressures of custom, convention, disapproval and excommunication. On certain occasions and at certain periods of history this is the liberty that matters. Libertarian ideas in the eighteenth century served the social and political aims of the forces rising to power and marked a new stage in Western social progress. But where the liberty concerned happens to be that of privileged sections of society or racial castes who desire to continue social practices which inflict deprivation on the less

⁸ Mill, *Liberty*.

privileged, the cry of "liberty" is in the interests of the *status quo* and of injustice.

Russell sees only the liberty of letting as many people as possible do what they like in so far as they do not interfere with the equal liberty of others to do the same. But he fails to learn the lesson of the whole development of the industrial revolution in the nineteenth century which showed all political parties that "one law for the lion and the ox is tyranny", that *laissez-faire* moves inevitably to the greater and greater restriction by poverty, by inescapable economic law, of the overwhelming majority. Nobody intends this. It is not the wilful cruelty of wicked men. It is what good men find themselves doing although they don't want to. Freedom generates a mass of unfreedom at the opposite pole, man enslaves himself to forces whose control is now beyond him. So far from being free, he is whirled like a leaf on the gales of social change. The freedom of each man's struggles for his own aims, so far from making men free, binds them over to chance. Blind fate, in the shapes of war, unbalanced trade, unemployment, slumps, accompanied by despair and neurosis, attacks the free man. If this is the case, we actually increase freedom by certain restraints (the Factory Acts) or government regulations of trade, wages, employment and the banks.

But Russell sees society only as exerting a regrettable if necessary limitation on our freedom and therefore hampering the free development of personality. All social obligations are restraints on spontaneous liberty. The assumption implicit in this view is that only the animal is really free. No-one constrains the solitary carnivore to do anything. Always in the mind of Russell there is the picture of the free man hampered and corrupted by institutions. Unfortunately not only is man not good without institutions, he is not evil either. He is no man at all. Man finds his *positive* freedom, the freedom to accomplish the things most important to fulness of life, from his daily bread to his enjoyment

of a symphony orchestra, only in society, only in the acceptance of the requirements of joint labour, in the fields of economics, of agriculture, of learning and of the arts. Society is the only instrument of freedom.⁴

Russell should go back to his early teachers McTaggart and Bradley. Where does the individual come from, whose self is to be realised? He is permeated by the world, by heredity, by the traditions of his country, by his education. He is born not into a desert but into a living society. "He grows with his world, his mind fills and orders itself, and when he can separate himself from that world, and know himself apart from it, then by that time his self is penetrated, infected, characterised by the existence of others. Its content implies in every fibre relations of community. Is he now to try and develop his individuality, his self which is not to be the same as other selves? Where is it? What is it? Where can we find it? The soul within him is saturated, is filled, is qualified by, it has assimilated, has got its substance, has built itself up from, it is one and the same life with the universal life."⁵

We learn that we are free not in spite of social relations but *through* them. A man incapable of the subordination of self to others, of co-operation, of accepting obligations and responsibilities, remains the anarchistic individual. But he may well be disgusted with the society that has grown up around him on the basis of his own possessive individualism, and thus comprises, in a strange contradictory complex, both all the possibilities and necessary conditions of a rich personal life, and all the frustrations and destructive forces which reduce life to chaos and despair.

In this situation Russell tends to believe that man can only escape from the evil effects of such social relations by casting them off and returning to a freer society with less constraints. He believes that freedom and happiness can be

⁴ But not of course in a corrupt society, e.g. under slavery.

⁵ F. H. Bradley, *Ethical Studies*.

found by one's own individual action. Everywhere today will be found the conscious and unconscious followers of Russell—"the pacifists, the well meaning liberals, the idealists, all seeking the impossible solution, salvation through the free act of the individual will amid decay and disaster. They cannot believe that freedom and happiness can only be found through social relations, by co-operating with others to change them."⁶ What is responsible for our despair is the assumption that an individualistic pattern of society is the only possible one. Even in such a society co-operation must persist or society would disintegrate, but this is distorted and negated by the centrifugal forces of sheer egoism. The question, as Rousseau said, is whether we can re-mould society on a higher level than that of pre-industrial society, but one in which, like it, the social order is regarded as a highly articulated organism of members contributing in their different degrees to a social purpose. Russell, while admitting the benefits which have been achieved, deplores the inevitable consequence of a developing civilisation, "the increasing power of the state as against the individual". "Between those who care most for social cohesion and those who primarily value individual initiative there has been an age-long battle ever since the time of the Ancient Greeks." Hence we are becoming "static and unprogressive", and he sees ahead only "slavery, bigotry, intolerance and abject misery for the majority of mankind".⁷

All Russell can hope for is an uneasy compromise between the pressures of society and creative initiative. The state ought to attempt to bring about a social structure in which the creative impulses are encouraged, and the possessive discouraged. But he has no idea how this is to be done.

One way forward, he believes, would be the world state. But surely this is a suggestion quite contrary to his conviction that it is the growing size and complexity of society that

⁶ Christopher Caudwell, *The Concept of Freedom*.

⁷ *Authority and the Individual*.

most imposes frustration and tyranny on the individual? He sees also that this world state can hardly come about without another world war. These arguments are clearly of the kind which lead men to kill one another on the assumption that one more war will do the trick. Russell has of course long since abandoned this remedy.

When we contemplate Russell's last word on the relations between the individual and society we may ask whether the anarchic individualism, which both gives rise to his logical atomism and is also its logical outcome, limiting individual responsibility to a negative withholding of injury from others, will indefinitely support democratic government. This surely requires the positive assumption by each individual of full social responsibility as a member of the social and moral community, within which each life is determined and by which it is shaped.

We may also ask whether the philosophical atomism which Russell strives, and strives in vain, to make credible, does not blind him to the real nature of the individual as a member of a social community. Man is not an atomic unit.

As Maritain says :

"Man is very far from being a pure person; the human person is a poor, material individual, an animal born more poverty stricken than all other animals. . . . The human person is at the lowest level of personality, stripped and succourless; a person destitute and full of needs. Because of these deep lacks and in accordance with all the complements of being which spring from society and without which the person would remain, as it were, in a state of latent life, it happens that when a person enters into the society of his fellows, he becomes a part of a whole larger and better than its parts—and the entire person is engaged in and exists with a view to the common good of society."⁸

The fact that man transcends even the community does not prove that he is not rooted in it. The uniqueness of the

⁸ Jacques Maritain, *The Rights of Man*.

person and the richness of the community are one and the same thing in a healthy society. Under pathological conditions, under slavery, under any society which subordinates the welfare of the majority to the privileges of the minority, the pressures of society can be destructive of the individual. One must however make the aim of the dialectical unity of person and community. The individual without the community is a blindly drifting atom. As the egoist turns away from society his self-inflation is his frustration and at the same time an injury to the community. As the collective is made supreme, both person and community are degraded. As the person and the community are interdependent, nurturing and sustaining each other, they are of equal dignity, and their proper balance is the health of man and society. No evolutionary future awaits men except in association with all other men.

9

MYSTICISM AND LOGIC

Russell has always been much too dedicated to the critical examination of philosophy and every other form of thought to be in any way disturbed by the same treatment of his own endeavours. As he himself says, "The value of philosophy is, in fact, to be sought largely in its very uncertainty. The man who has no tincture of philosophy goes through life imprisoned in the prejudices derived from common sense, from the habitual beliefs of his age or his nature, and from convictions which have grown up in his mind without the co-operation or consent of his deliberate reason."¹

We have more need of the removal of errors and the raising of hitherto unconsidered questions than the formulation of wide systems of speculative metaphysics, of which philosophy will know no more. The first, if not the last, task of philosophy is "to remove the arrogant dogmatism of those who have never travelled into the region of liberating doubt".

But Russell does not only criticise error, he proclaims the principles of his own philosophy. And it is in his fundamental *pluralism*—the splitting up of the world into a chain of unrelated facts—that we find a theory which offers little help in understanding either the world or society. Closely dependent upon his atomism is the *dualism* of his thought, the dichotomy of experience into fact and value, atomic proposition and logical system, reason and morals. His con-

¹ *The Problems of Philosophy.*

viction about what is right is a property of his own mind and has no foundation in the nature of man and the necessities of social life. There is nothing that intelligence can devise to get a grip on events and mould things nearer to the heart's desire. What he wants with all his heart, the great humanitarian ideals he has worked for, are therefore completely out of reach. Inevitably pessimism underlies all his reformist writing. It is the brilliant disclosure of human folly and perversity which is remembered, rather than the ineffectual remedies suggested. Disbelief in any human regeneration drowns the short lived themes of hope and reconstruction, which do not carry, or perhaps intend, much conviction.

We owe a great debt of gratitude to Russell. We have too often seen the intellect confused by visionary speculation and muddled logic. Like Voltaire, Russell hated injustice, he hated cruelty, he hated senseless repression and he hated hocus-pocus. Furthermore, when he saw them, he knew them. "But if men cannot live on bread alone, still less can they do so on disinfectants",² and the positive element in Russell's philosophy provides nothing which shows men how to co-operate with a nature that appears an alien and irresistible mechanism.

In his well known essay on *A Free Man's Worship*³ Russell is brutally candid about this.

"That man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving; that his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and his beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms; that no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling, can preserve an individual life beyond the grave; that all the labour of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noon-day brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and that the whole

² Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World*.

³ *Mysticism and Logic*.

temple of man's achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins—all these things, if not quite beyond dispute, are yet so nearly certain, that no philosophy which rejects them can hope to stand. Only within the scaffolding of these truths, only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair, can the soul's habitation henceforth be safely built."

The roots of Russell's pessimism lie in the basic dualism of his thought, which also, and inevitably, offers a strong inducement to seek relief in the very mysticism that he in his better moments deplores.

When Descartes divided the world into two ultimate realities, he gave encouragement to physical science to get on with the task of discovering the mechanical laws of the world which would "render ourselves the lords and possessors of nature", from which would flow vast benefits to mankind. The world of pure mind was left as the receptacle of religious ideas, man's ideals and dreams, the whole range of his spiritual interests and concerns. It requires only a shift of emphasis for this to move in one direction to idealism, which asserts that even the physical world, being only inferred from ideas in the mind, is really spiritual, or in the other direction to a materialism which accepts the physical world as real and the spiritual as merely the world of subjectivity.

Very much the same result follows when reality is comprehended exclusively in terms of sense data and the logical apparatus for dealing with them, and the ultimate reality is unfolded in the analysis of the process of knowing. Ordinary knowledge, which appears to be about the physical world, begins and ends with sense data, so that the things themselves disappear in the process of analysis. "The method supposes that the more precise, more clear, and more ultimate knowledge which we desire of the nature of things, can be obtained by a purely logical-philosophical analysis, as *distinct from* a continuation of scientific investigation—

by passive contemplation as distinct from active investigation."⁴ Russell sees the task of the philosopher as constructing the world by a series of definitions, by an enterprise of philosophical speculation the results of which cannot be tested or verified. The result can only be to lead away from the path of useful knowledge into endless logical debate which rejects "the clear objective impact of scientific knowledge, as an ever-developing and ever more accurate comprehensive picture of the objective world; to obscure the fact that we have gained and are gaining objective knowledge in relation to which we need, not speculative interpretation, but an understanding of how to apply it fully to gain a mastery over nature and over our own destinies."⁵

Russell cannot dismiss entirely from his mind ideas which his philosophy has excluded from the logically acceptable, the objective world of sense data and logical constructions. But what authority have they, what kind of reality is theirs, how valid are the judgments of right and wrong, and the human hopes and desires that so largely make them up? Like Descartes' spiritual furniture, they are relegated to the mind alone. Demanding ideals to live for and principles to live by, philosophy (and science) are silent. Russell, however, cannot dispense with them, nor can any of us. The inference that he and those who listen to him must draw is that for guidance in the problems of life, since we must not seek it from thinking or from thinkers, we must accept our intuitions and abandon the hopes of a rational understanding of life. So far as "intuitions" are concerned this may not do any harm to the wise and good, but it opens the door to a torrent of illusions and fanatical ideas for the foolish and the perverted.

All that Russell is so deeply concerned about socially and morally is left by him hanging in the air unrelated to actu-

⁴Cornforth, *Science Versus Idealism*.

⁵Ibid.

ality, lacking any principles of discrimination to discern truth from falsehood, right from wrong, unrelated to science, and not capable of being developed as a rational sociology. This is the inevitable consequence of the unrelieved dualism of fact and value, science and society, ethics and the natural order. It remains so not only for Russell, but for all linguistic analysis that pursues only the path of endless logical regression, and for all those influenced in a second-hand way who have been perusaded that our ideals and hopes, our moral principles and anticipations of social progress belong to the world of subjective values and not to the world of facts.

Cosmic Impiety

Russell is so overawed and intimidated by the hostility of the universe to man's ideals that he even engages in a further philosophical argument against his own ideals, to convince himself and all of us that they are powerless.

The belief in an external universe of recalcitrant fact which the mind discovers but does not create has, he points out, curbed man's pride and kept him humble.

"The Greeks with their dread of *hubris* and their belief in a Necessity or Fate superior even to Zeus, carefully avoided what would have seemed to them insolence towards the universe."⁶

"Cosmic impiety" occurs when the human mind legislates instead of conforming to the universe, prescribing to it what it should be instead of adopting a modest attitude to what is. This is the source of intellectual *hubris*, the characteristic vice of our time. Let us quote Russell on the subject:

"In all this I feel a grave danger of what might be called cosmic impiety. The concept of 'truth' as something dependent upon facts largely outside human control has been one of the ways in which philosophy hitherto has inculcated the necessary element of humility. When this check upon

⁶ *History of Western Philosophy*.

pride is removed, a further step is taken on the road towards a certain kind of madness—the intoxication of power which invaded philosophy with Fichte, and to which modern men, whether philosophers or not, are prone. I am persuaded that this intoxication is the greatest danger of our time, and that any philosophy which, however unintentionally, contributes to it is increasing the danger of vast social disaster.”⁷

If Russell were simply warning us against seeking to impose our personal ideals upon the world regardless of external conditions, no-one would quarrel with him. We would agree that “truth must conform to objective fact, not prescribe to it”. But scientific investigation discovers objective laws not to reconcile us to the inevitable but to show us how to use them to human advantage. Russell himself enjoys all the advantages of modern heating, sanitation, travel, international trade to supply his dinner table (and tobacco). He fully accepts the benefits of irrigation, scientific agriculture, antiseptic surgery, antibiotics, the telephone and the art of printing his books by machinery. This is not the life of simply accepting nature as it is to Pithecanthropus Erectus. It is altering the world, changing it, using its laws to make the best use of its resources.

Russell’s statements lay themselves open to the profoundly unscientific interpretation that the world cannot be changed by human effort, that to accept the rule of natural law is to confess one’s powerlessness. The fact is, of course, that it is precisely our knowledge of natural laws that enables us to alter the world, for we alter it by obeying them, by “systematically making them work towards definite human ends.”⁸ It is not man’s whole duty to accept nature as it is, but to change it. Nature is not a fixed quantity, a revolving wheel, but a self-creative thing. It was making itself anew before man appeared. When it evolved man it made some-

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Engels, *Anti-Dühring*.

thing new and itself consciously and scientifically creative in a new way.

This is an art

Which does mend nature, change it rather, but
The art itself is nature.⁹

"For man is a part of nature, carried on by her forces to work the works of intelligence. In him she bursts forth into sustained consciousness of her own evolution. . . . You cannot add him as some extraneous figure tacked on as a negligible quantity to a sum already total, for he has grown out of nature's own stuff and been wrought in her workshop. He is, then, no mere commentator in the world or spectator of it. Nor can we regard the mechanism of nature as a factory where machines run on, but where there is supreme indifference to the product. Rather must we regard it as that which supports and maintains what we choose to call ideal products, and finds in them its significance and justification."¹⁰

This throws much light on those values and ideals which for Russell belong wholly to the subjective mind and which nature only contradicts. We are a part of nature and nature has created us; our desires and values are therefore also part of nature and produced by nature. They have indeed proved a most effective force in constraining men to improve their condition by discovering and utilising natural law. Man is not in this respect opposed to nature. The moral dimension becomes a dimension of the natural. We are not concerned then to ask what nature is like considered apart from man; for that is a wholly artificial abstraction. Nor are we to ask what man is in his hopes and ethical principles as though this could have nothing to do with nature.

Russell's mistake is characteristic of the speculative philosopher. If you look passively at nature it does of course present a problem, and an insoluble one. If you consider the work of thought to be the unravelling of *knowing* independ-

⁹ Shakespeare, *The Winter's Tale*.

¹⁰ Woodbridge, *Nature and Mind*.

ently of *doing*, this paralysis necessarily follows. Merely looking at nature from without, and asking what it can all mean and whether it in any way conduces to man's good, must be a purely speculative enterprise which is unable to arrive at any *verifiable* conclusions, conclusions, that is to say, which can be tested by experiment, or further observations, or by trying the theory out in the field of practical affairs. Its whole tendency is to lead away from real knowledge into purely abstract discussions.

The shift of reason away from scientific and historical problems to those of logic and language, away from the actual world in which philosophers cease to be interested as philosophers, leaves the actual world not only inexplicable but beyond our power to handle or modify. Hence the philosopher can have nothing to say about human destiny or the effort to control the world except to deplore such efforts as "cosmic impiety".

As Gellner says, "This ignores history—is timeless and is concerned with concepts or words as if they were eternal and society never changed. Therefore this view signposts the *status quo* and resists change."¹¹

This despairing attitude echoes the sermons of the theologians whom Russell despises, who are also anxious to convict us of cosmic impiety and convince us of the hopelessness of all attempts at human betterment.

"Somehow or other, by hook or by crook, this world must be robbed of the importance which it has had in men's minds for the last hundred years. There is another world or order of life which is more important still."¹²

We have to conclude that we fail to find in Russell's philosophy that organic unity of thought and reality which alone can render knowledge intelligible and ethical judgments valid. It is divorced from the stream of events in the

¹¹ Gellner, *Thought and Change*.

¹² The Rev. D. R. Davies in a Broadcast address.

ever-changing reality. Even as a logic it fails. It is only in epochs of philosophical decadence that logic reduces itself to a merely formal discipline. Real logic is found by thinking about the nature of reality, not to interpret it, but to alter it.

The Value of Philosophy

This might seem an ungenerous judgment on a man of such distinction, but, as Wittgenstein says, we have to beware of that philosophy which is no more than "the bewitchment of intelligence by language". Russell writes beautifully and we are often swept along irresistibly by his arguments. But someone has said that he is the only person to be awarded the Order of Merit for writing bad philosophy in impeccable English. He almost hints as much himself when he tells us that "the British are distinguished among the nations of modern Europe on the one hand by the excellence of their philosophers, and on the other hand by their contempt for philosophy. In both respects they show their wisdom. But contempt for philosophy, if developed to the point at which it becomes systematic, is itself a philosophy. I suggest that philosophy, if it is bad philosophy, may be dangerous, and therefore deserves that degree of negative respect which we accord to lightning and tigers. What positive respect may be due to 'good' philosophy I will leave for the moment an open question."¹⁸

How are we to apply this evaluation to Russell's own philosophy? Is it a bad philosophy and highly dangerous? Is it a good philosophy? In fact there is no Russellian Philosophy, but only a series of studies of different aspects of philosophy from the standpoint of "the hard facts school"—the empiricists—in its modern logical form. Russell makes no attempt to develop a consistent metaphysic—in fact as each new phase runs into difficulties, it is dropped and a new line of thought started. He has con-

¹⁸ *Philosophy and Politics*.

fessed that for him credibility is more important than consistency, and that a wholly consistent philosophy may be wholly false. But in Russell's case it is not only inconsistency but a fatal contradiction that brings his thinking to an impasse. He has written nothing of any consequence since 1940 when he published *An Inquiry into Meaning and Truth*. He has from that time virtually ceased to philosophise.

It would appear that his philosophy has involved itself in a hopeless position—there can be nothing more to say; the difficulties which confront it are insuperable. It does not seem possible to draw the different threads of his thinking together so as to escape the dilemmas before him. Chief among these is the dichotomy between his logico-mathematical metaphysics on the one hand and the categorical imperative of his moral convictions on the other. So strongly does he feel these that he has given up all further philosophical enquiry and devoted the last twenty-seven years almost entirely to social and political propaganda. But he can find no endorsement of this dedication in his philosophy—on the contrary it undermines it and negates it.

Is it then a bad philosophy? To answer that question we have to note the important fact that Russell's analytical method as developed by Wittgenstein and his followers has virtually swept the older metaphysical systems out of our universities. There is hardly a chair of philosophy that is not occupied by a representative of the new school of Linguistic Analysis or one of its derivatives. Is this simply disaster? By no means. Empirical thinking has established itself and the older speculative philosophy has faded away. The influence of Hegel, Bradley, Bosanquet and the rest on the thinking of intellectuals who are not professional philosophers is at its lowest ebb. The search for total explanations, for metaphysical answers to the problems of human destiny has been abandoned by contemporary philosophy.

But analytical philosophy is still almost entirely negative in its impact. It is not only empirical, that is to say *based* on experience, but *empiricist*, that is to say *limited* by present experience. It cannot get any farther than an enquiry into how to state most clearly what we already know and feel as to matters of fact and current moral judgments. It "leaves everything as it is". It cannot transcend the *status quo* because to do so appears to empiricism to involve us in metaphysics. For Russell, whose every instinct compels him to reject what is generally "known" and "felt" in current affairs, the self-contradictory present, the here and now, *must* be transcended, whether his own philosophy allows it or not. And it does not allow it, for it operates with a methodology which leaves no room, no possibility, for the speculative insight which demands the right to criticise existing standards and social structures. Such criticism for Russell, therefore, has to find its sanction in an emotionally-based ethical commitment. From logic he is driven irresistibly to mysticism.

Russell was never able to find a rational justification for any law or theory behind the observed facts. The theory of induction is the despair of analytical philosophy, and yet nothing less than a theory which does transcend observation can get us beyond the limits of the already known. Deprived of that possibility reason can only summarise existing fact or unfold tautologies. But that can do no more than reveal what is already implied in present knowledge. This is the utmost limit of Russell's logical method. It can explain nothing; it cannot go forward beyond the categories of the present; it cannot attempt to show us in rational and critical terms the path beyond what is to what might be.

Whitehead has pointed out that a man with a method good for purposes of his restricted interests, may be a pathological case in respect to the long range problems of human life.¹⁴ He is disposed to turn "an eye that is

¹⁴ Whitehead, *The Function of Reason*.

characteristically cold on all questions of belief—questions of a religious, moral, political or generally cosmic variety”, as problems with which it has no concern.¹⁵ And the result is not, as might have been expected, that nothing at all is said. On the contrary if “for guidance in the problems of life one must not seek it from thinkers or from thinking, one must look to people who are not thinkers (but fools), to processes that are not thinking (but passion), and to rules that are not principles (but rules of expedience).”¹⁶

It would seem, therefore, that in so far as Russell has in his philosophical thinking done no more than show us how to regulate the expression of our thought in logical terms, and within the limits of the accepted “forms of life”, as Wittgenstein calls them, the more we are compelled to exclude the ideas and conjectures, the criticism and enlightenment which transcend the categories of the present and escape its methodology.

But Russell has only discovered one form of reasoning, that of his logical system, his methodology; but there is another reason which surveys the processes and the aims of any system, and judges and understands. The Greeks have given us two figures which conform to these notions—Plato and Ulysses. The one shares reason with the gods, the other shares it with the foxes. Logical system operates within the given process of any system, it is a factor within the world and is concerned with immediate methods of action. Reason as understanding asserts itself above the system to criticise its shortcomings and point the way forward to a fundamental modification of society. The mathematician, the man of business and the politician are all empiricists and confine their reasoning to their immediate ends. The more clearly they grasp the intellectual analysis of the method of regulating the necessary procedures, the more likely are they to reject any form of reasoning which

¹⁵ Warnock, *British Philosophy Science* 1900.

¹⁶ Collingwood, *Autobiography*.

goes beyond their present interests. "Some of the major disasters of mankind have been produced by the narrowness of men with a good methodology. Ulysses has no use for Plato, and the bones of his companions are strewn on many a reef and many an isle."¹⁷

Nothing can be more disastrous than the self-satisfied dogmatism with which mankind at each period of its history cherishes the "forms of life" reflecting its existing knowledge and ways of living. A self-satisfied rationalism of this sort is in effect a form of anti-rationalism. It means an arbitrary halt at a particular set of social categories. Russell rejects those of his time with his emotions, but with his mind he has forged a system of logical analysis which petrifies thought by limiting it to handling propositions reflecting things as they are. But the essence of life is to be found only in the frustration of established order. "If we construe the new epoch in terms of the forms of order of its predecessor, we see mere confusion."¹⁸ We require philosophy to do more than that, it has to explain the rise of new types of order, the transition from type to type. A frozen, motionless universe can at the most be the type of pure logical system, with the bare comment—That is so.

¹⁷ Whitehead, *The Function of Reason*.

¹⁸ Whitehead, *Modes of Thought*.

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His new book on *Bertrand Russell, Philosopher and Humanist* is a study, at once sympathetic, popular and profound, of the life and work of England's most influential living philosopher. John Lewis acutely traces out the tension between Russell's abstruse mathematical philosophy and his humanist beliefs, and at the same time subjects to a penetrating criticism both his abstract logical analysis and his views on contemporary society.

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The photograph on the front of the cover, showing Bertrand Russell at the sit-down in Trafalgar Square, London, organised on 18th February 1961 by the Committee of 100 as a protest against nuclear armament (for which action Russell was subsequently awarded a sentence of imprisonment by the Metropolitan Magistrates), is reproduced by kind permission of The Morning Star.